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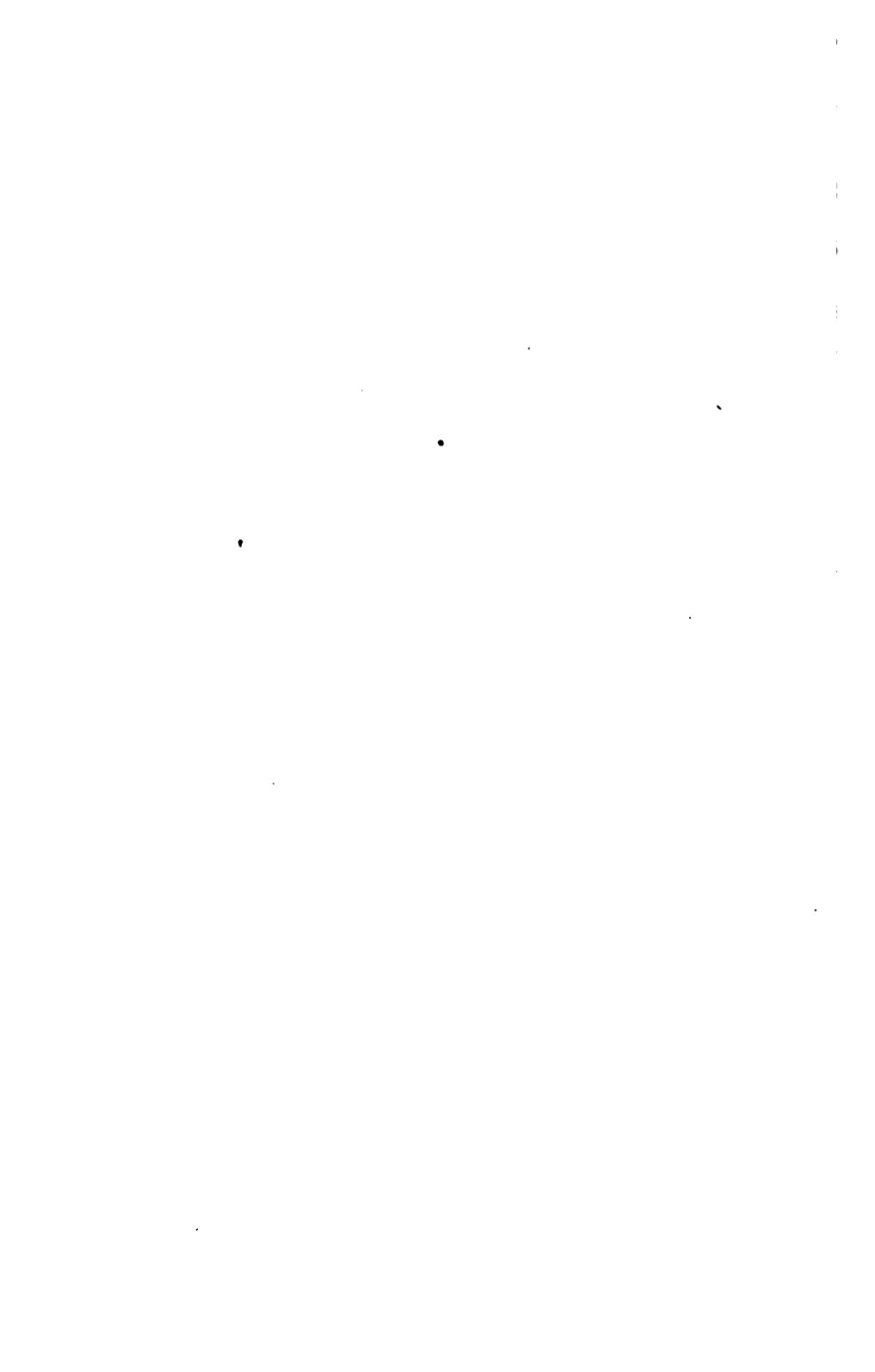




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# STRATHMORE

A Romance.

BY OUIDA.

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There are depths in Man that go the lengths of lowest Hell, as there are heights that reach highest Heaven; for are not both Heaven and Hell made out of him, made by him, everlasting Miracle and Mystery that he is?

CARLYLE.

Oblivion cannot be hired.—SIR THOMAS BROWNE'S "*Urn Burial*."

Good and evil we know, in the field of this world, grow up together almost inseparably; and the knowledge of good is so involved and interwoven with the knowledge of evil, that those confused seeds which were imposed upon Psyche as an incessant labour to cull out and sort asunder were not more intermixed.—MILTON.

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

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reason on, that Strathmore was rather followed and respected as one of the chiefs of a great party, than surrounded by men's warmer sympathies; and that, while he led and influenced them, he lived isolated from, because independent and negligent of, their personal cordiality. This *she* never traced to its due cause, which lay in his own neglect and contempt of the esteem and support which most men seek—his own cold and all-sufficing self-reliance, which withdrew him from the pale of human sympathies. *She* blamed for it a world which she thought did not read aright a character that, in her sight, was little less than god-like. And the single reason which made her listen to and like Valdor was, because he spoke to her as Strathmore's friend.

He did not wholly mistake the cause which gave him this preference; he knew women too well, and read this soilless and transparent heart at a glance; but the very sense, which he felt from the onset, that he who had been the courted of patrician coquettes might perchance fail here, lent his love but fresh charm and new excitement. He saw that the way to Lucille's confidence and regard was to speak of Strathmore to her as she held him; and this way he took with the subtle tact of the world. Strathmore himself watched his intercourse with her with vigilance, almost with apprehension, which at times foreshadowed to him what, in the face of the past, he refused to acknowledge—that circumstances may net in the power and outweigh the might of the finest fore-

# STRATHMORE.

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## CHAPTER I.

### UNDER THE AISLE OF THE PALMS.

Of the many who at White Ladies flattered the beauty and sought to win the smile of Strathmore's ward, the only one to whom Lucille gave heed, was Valdor.

She was indifferent to all; they neither banished her childhood, nor taught her her power; and the graceful flatteries which might have done so, she heard half amused, half surprised, while they fell from her thoughts as the rain falls from rose-leaves, leaving no stain behind. To Valdor alone she showed favour; not because his pursuit of her was made with all the skill and fascination which lengthened experience in woman's favour had lent him, but because she found in him what she thought a sincere friendship towards Strathmore, which she found in no other. The young girl perceived, what she did not



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#### UNDER THE AISLE OF THE PALMS.

all veiled from her, whose lawless passions she knew of no more than she knew of the evil and the bitterness of human life, from which he had guarded her.

Valdor for the first time forgot his tact and his resolve in the irritation of a jealous impatience.

“ We who know him, mademoiselle,” he answered, quickly, “ are accustomed, on the contrary, to say that Strathmore has an iron hand under a silken glove. I have seen it grip very brutally, though (to be just to him) I have known it give very generously. Why feel so much gratitude to him as your guardian ? It is an office most men would but too gladly discharge to such a ward ; and—you do not know that he remains, now your early years are passed, so wholly and purely disinterested ! ”

“ Disinterested ! ” She echoed his last word in wonder, in rebuke, in as much resentment as could be roused in a nature which had all the gentle softness of her father’s ; and, in truth, she did not even faintly understand him.

“ Yes, you have yet to learn your own loveliness, your own power ! ” said Valdor, with impetuous bitterness ; “ and Strathmore, though he is an ascetic now, may not be dead to all the passions which once ruled him quite as utterly as ambition does at the present.”

The moment his words were spoken he repented them ; he knew how rash and ill-advised they were, by the effect they wrought. Her eyes gazed at him like the eyes of a startled bird, darkened and dilating ;



startled, alarmed, shocked her with a force he had never foreseen ; whether they had revolted her by the supposition of such a passion in one who filled to her her father's place, or whether they had awakened her to that which she had never dreamed before, was a doubt which unceasingly tortured him, crossed now and again by a hope that this half child-like, half woman-like terror might be born of some feeling for himself. The very action with which she had fled from him was not unlike the first dawn of love in such a nature as Lucille's, spiritual as Una's, poetic as Undine's, which seemed—

Too pure even for the purest human ties.

He was impatient till he made his peace with her ; impatient till by look or word from her he could put his last faint and new-born hope to test. Brilliant, handsome, and still young, the French noble was pardonably sure of his fascination over women ; here, for the first time, he misdoubted his power, perhaps because, for the first time, he genuinely and honourably *—loved.*

He saw a change in her when they met again a few hours later ; slight, not to be defined, yet something which was unmistakable. The colour was deeper and more uncertain on her cheek, the lashes drooped over her eyes, which had lost the clearness and cloudlessness of their regard, and on her face there was a new look, half light, half shadow ; the transparent waters of her thoughts had been stirred and troubled, never again to know their perfect peace.

Valdor knew its cause, and his pulses beat quicker as he thought that it might be himself for whom stirred that still half-conscious love. Strathmore saw it also; when he addressed or approached her, her eyes no longer met his own in glad smiles or pleading earnestness; he saw that something had been said or done to her to scare away the unthinking peace of childhood, as a single touch suffices to scare from its rest the brooding bird.

He turned to young Caryll as he passed him in the drawing-rooms in the evening:

“Have you broken your word?”

The youth started and looked bewildered; the angry colour flushed his face:

“No, Sir. I have the same blood in my veins that you have!”

The answer was spirited, and to its truth the young man’s candid, unflinching glance bore witness. Strathmore bowed his head with that warm, frank smile now so rare upon his lips:

“True! The question wronged you, and I beg your pardon sincerely for having insulted you with it.”

Lionel Caryll had disliked and feared him before, had dreaded his word, and shunned his presence; at the courtly amende rendered, because it was his due, as gracefully to a young dependent kinsman as it would have been to the highest among his peers, the youth saw for the first time all that was generous and best in his nature, and ceased to marvel that Lucille

found much to venerate, and much which fascinated her, in a character which until now had seemed to him to possess many grand traits, but not one human sympathy.

“ Mlle. Lucille, you shun us,” whispered Valdor softly, late that night, as he was at last alone with her in one of the conservatories, whither, missing her from the circle, he had tracked, and found her ; the light from above falling on her, about her broad-leaved palms, brilliant creepers, and eastern citron-trees, while the waters of the fountain by which she stood fell musically in the silence.

She started.

“ I did not shun you. I only came to fetch my spaniel.”

“ The dog is very dear to you, is he not ?”

“ Yes ! He was my father’s ; the only thing I have of his.”

Valdor looked at her in her silence where she leaned against the marble basin : that fugitive likeness which perpetually evaded him wavered before him now, and, like some strong light which brings what is shadowy into palpable shape, the memory of one whom he had often seen in the very place where she now stood, arose before him, invoked by the groundless fancy with which he had associated her. In the remembrance of Erroll, he saw whose it was that her face recalled to him, and the wild dreaming folly of a thought he had contemned grew into a sudden vivid

belief, rootless, unproved, untenable, but clear as the day in his sight. Was *this* Strathmore's secret?

“The spaniel is very happy to have such a claim to your affection,” he said gently, and almost hesitatingly, for she arrested the words of flattery and love upon his lips. To whisper of passion to this beautiful child seemed impossible.

She did not answer—perhaps she did not hear him; but she bent her head till her lips touched the shining silky curls of the dog. As he saw the caress given to the animal, by the young lips which he longed to teach to tremble and grow warm under a lover's kiss, the new hope that he cherished stirred and strengthened in him. He bent tenderly towards her:

“Lucille, you so gentle to a dog, will be merciful to me! I deeply regret the words which I was so rude as to offend you with to-day; will you forgive them?”

She did not raise her head, but he saw the colour rise, deepen, and burn on her cheek, and her heart beat with quick, uncertain throbs; they gave him more than hope, almost certainty itself, and he stooped lower still, fearful of scaring this shy and dawning love from him by a too swift grasp.

“I would not for an empire breathe one word which should ever wound you, and I spoke in haste and error. You will forgive me, will you not?”

Resentment could not exist in her nature; she turned to him and held out her hand, with pardoning and winning grace:

“ Oh, monsieur, yes ! I forgive——”

As his lips touched her hand in gratitude more eloquent than speech could offer, the broad drooping leaves of the tropical foliage fringing the path through the conservatories moved ; and Strathmore, who had that moment entered from the rooms beyond, stood looking on them. He saw the blush on Lucille’s face, as it still lingered there—he saw the kiss which Valdor left upon her hand, and he knew then who had wrought that shadow of disquiet on her face, who had banished childhood and awakened love.

Valdor released her, and turned to Strathmore with the easy carelessness of a man of the world :

“ My lord ! I tell Mademoiselle Lucille that you and I have had so many friends in common, that I feel sure I must have known her father. Did I do so ?”

“ I told you once, no doubt you did.”

“ But not well enough to recal him ? Dieu ! that comes of leading a crowded life ! Wait ! I think I knew a De Vocqsal once, one of the Viennese Bureaucracy ; was it he ?”

“ No ! not the same race. I remember whom you mean, but he is a governor in Galicia at the present time. There are none of Lucille’s family living.”

He spoke so naturally that Valdor was for the moment deceived ; there could be no mystery here ; it must be a chimera of his own imagining—a bubble without substance ! At that moment the groom of the chambers approached him with a special despatch,

marked "Immediate." And with an apology he quitted the conservatory, and left them.

Strathmore was alone with her, and the silence between them was for once unbroken, save by the falling of the fountains; and for the first time he saw that she stood embarrassed before him, that her eyes shunned his, and that she bent away from his gaze over the border of the marble basin. It smote him with a fierce and cruel pain. This was the first sign of the alienation which would ensue between them when her heart wandered to her lover—to her husband.

But, whatever he was to all others, with her he allowed no personal feeling to move him from that gentleness which he rendered her, for in his eyes she was sacred, and to secure her peace he would have sacrificed himself at any cost. He bent towards her, and his eyes, cold and unrevealing, the eyes "fathomless and darkly-wise" of the Legend, softened with an unspeakable sadness:

"Lucille! have you a secret from *me*?"

The reproach quivered to her heart, and her face grew pale, even to the lips. She started and trembled as she leant over the water, playing with the lilies on its surface, and the pain of alienation smote him deeper and more cruelly—he was answered.

He had not deemed it possible that this young life so late laid bare to him in its every thought, wish, and instinct, could learn so soon to harbour a concealment from him. But his voice did not lose its gen-

tleness, nor his eyes their fondness, as he bent still downward to her :

“ Lucille ! will you not trust me with it ? No one can already have taught you doubt of how entirely I am sure to sympathise with your every wish, and give you happiness, if human means can make it ? ”

She lifted her head quickly, and in her eyes were all their old love and reverence.

“ Doubt *you* ? Oh no ! I could as soon doubt the goodness and the mercy of God——”

He passed his hand over her brow caressingly.

“ Then tell me what has changed you since this morning ? What is this new barrier, my child, which has arisen between us ? ”

The colour burned afresh in her cheeks, her eyes glanced at him shy, hauntingly, half ashamed, yet filled with a new light, then drooped beneath his own.

He stood silent beside her for a moment, mastering that bitter pain which gnawed within him : a stern word or a harsh thought he would not have given to her to purchase his own life. He waited till he could speak calmly and gently.

“ Lucille, tell me—as your guardian I have a title to ask—did you refuse the Marquis of Bowden’s hand, because your own preference turned to some other ? ”

The flush deepened over her brow and bosom, and she twisted the lily-leaves unconsciously together, as she stooped over the fountain away from his gaze : again her silence answered him.

“Lucille, can you not trust me in so little? Tell me whom it is—that you love?”

He had no answer, save the flush which burned and wavered in her face, the tremble of the drooped eyelids, the quiver in the silent lips, as she bent down over the water—these were eloquent enough. Leaning over the fountain, she too saw her face reflected in the water, saw all that it told, and all the change which had come there, and with a sudden movement, almost of alarm, she turned and would have left him—his hand arrested her.

“Lucille, I will not force your confidence, but I must sue for it. I did not think that a few hours of a new and dearer fancy could have so soon estranged you from me.”

His voice was gentle still, but the restrained pain and rebuke in his words vibrated through it; her swift desertion from him stung him painfully. Held by his hand, she stood motionless for a moment, her head drooped, her face flushed with its hot, betraying blush; then she broke from him, and throwing herself down beside the fountain, with her head bowed, she sobbed bitterly—tears half sweet, half bitter, born from what spring she barely knew, risen from the heart which was half unconscious, half fearful of all which was waking in it. Her tears were terrible to him!—they were the mockery of all the care and prescience with which he had sought to work out his stonement by the guardianship of this single existence from every touch of pain or misery! And mortal

griefs seemed to have no part or share with Lucille's life.

These broken, voiceless sobs thrilled like fire through his soul, callous to pain, and dead to mercy with all others ; he raised her fondly from where she knelt, and drew her to him till her bright head was bowed upon his breast.

"Lucille, my child, what has been done to you ? Have any dared to grieve—to pain—to tamper with you ?"

She turned her eyes on him one moment, beseeching and fearful through their tears :

"No, no ! I do not know why—what—"

The words were barely above her breath, hurried and tremulous ; her face was very pale now, her glance shunned his :—at that instant the leaves were swept aside by some entrance from the rooms beyond, and starting from him, Lucille fled through the screen of Oriental foliage, and left him ere he could arrest her.

Valdor had entered.

Strathmore stood silent by the fountain, under the fan-like leaves of the palms and banyans, his face as white and fathomless as the marble on which his hand leaned, and he did not greet the approach of his friend and guest by word or sign, as the other hurried to him with an open letter in his hand.

"Read that, Strathmore, and you will see, however rude it be, that I am compelled to leave your hospitality to-night."

Strathmore glanced at the paper silently, and returned it: he was intimate with all the hopes, plans, and intrigues of Valdor's party. He neither favoured nor condemned them, but it was a portion of his policy to be more thoroughly and early acquainted than any other with the movements of all foreign schisms or projects, and Valdor, passionate, transparent, and open as the day, with all the chivalry and indiscretion which have so fatally characterised all extreme Royalists of every age, confided in and to him without reserve.

"I much regret a summons which will deprive me of the pleasure of your society," he said, with cold courtesy. "But since you must leave us immediately, there is a subject on which I desire to speak with you at once."

Valdor looked up, his animated and eloquent eyes losing all their languor:

"You do not desire it more than I. No doubt you mean concerning my love for your young ward? —perhaps you imagine that I may have been without serious thought or intent——"

"I imagine nothing—I never imagine!" said Strathmore, impatiently. "I have the honour to await your explanation."

"Pardieu! it lies in one word—*love!*!" answered the French noble, the indolence and indifference of custom breaking away before the warmth of his passion. "Strathmore, I know well enough you will command offers of marriage for her far more brilliant

than mine; many will offer her riches, affluence, station, all that I have lost in a thankless cause and for a lethargic prince; but rank better than mine there is not in Europe, and love truer and warmer she will never win than she has roused in me——”

“Had you not better pour out all this eloquence in her own ear? I fear I interrupted your tender scene a few moments ago?” interrupted Strathmore, in his soft and languid voice, the slight sneer falling like ice-water on the impassioned and eager tones of the chivalrous Legitimist.

Valdor pardoned the sneer for the permission it conveyed:

“Can I do so? Finding you alone I feared she might have retired for the night; it is so late. God only knows how bitter it is to me to leave her at all—above all without a farewell—but what can I do? My honour is involved.”

Strathmore did not answer, but rang for the groom of the chambers:

“Order horses to be put to, horses to post twenty miles; but inquire first if Mlle. de Vocqsal be in the drawing-rooms.”

The servant returned in a few minutes:

“Mlle. de Vocqsal has gone to her own apartments for the night, my lord.”

Strathmore signed to him to retire:

“It is impossible you see,” he said briefly, as they were left alone; and with these few words he crushed out, as a matter of not the slightest moment, the glad,

vivid hope he had inspired, whose disappointment made Valdor's cheek pale as he turned away with a swift movement and paced the conservatory with fast, uneven steps. Suddenly he halted before Strathmore, who had not moved from his position, standing under the palm-trees, with his hand on the marble basin.

"I must trust myself to your mercy and intercession then. Will you be my ambassador with her?"

"Have you grounds for supposing she returns your love?"

Valdor hesitated a moment:

"Grounds? No. I dare not say that I have, though she has seemed at times to prefer me to others, and to-night——"

"What of to-night? The question was sharp and imperious.

"To-night I could have sworn that her heart had wakened, and wakened for me; her blush, her shyness—tell me, you saw her the moment I had left her—do you believe that I deceive myself or not?"

"I believe that you do not. I believe that Lucille loves you."

The answer was cold, but it was rigid to truth. There was this that was grand in Strathmore's nature—he never *spared himself*; and those words had judged him justly which had drawn him "a dangerous man always, but a false man or a mean man—never."

Valdor's face lightened with a frank, glad, passionate joy :

"Thank God ! And when I return you will give her to me ?"

"I will never oppose what concerns her happiness."

"And I may ask you to be my intercessor now ?" went on Valdor, swiftly, in the quick eagerness of a nature which knew hot joy and scorned a timorous hesitance as cowardice, as he stood before Strathmore in the midnight silence under the aisle of the palms. "I am compelled to leave her in what will seem to her a manner so cold and strange, that it may well look incompatible with any love worthy the name ; may I trust to you to make it clear to her why I go, and why I could not wait even for the assurance and the farewell to-morrow could have given ? Will you leave no doubt, no cloud, no mystery, on my departure which might wound her or chill her towards me, as one who has not loved her as she has a right to be beloved ? Will you feel for me in the absence, to which every law of honour binds me, in the moment of all others when honour is most hard to follow ?—will you remember that I am driven from her in the very hour when I have learnt to love as I never learnt before ? and while I am far away, defenceless and powerless against all those who will strive to rob me, will you guard for me what you yourself believe that I have won ?"

Strathmore listened, the lids drooped over his eyes,

his face impassive as the marble against which he leaned, whilst Valdor, forgetting all that he knew, and all that rumour said of the heartlessness and callousness of the man to whom he pleaded, poured out his rapid words, while his voice grew mellow and his eyes dimmed with the earnestness of what he felt.

“Will you, Strathmore?” he repeated again. “I do not ask it for my own sake alone, but—if she *should* love me—one doubt is a woman’s curse, and that soft, delicate, lofty nature will never love but once.”

Strathmore stood silent, still, his face in shadow under the drooped palm-leaves, his eyes looking down into the water where the lotus-lilies she had toyed with floated lazily; none could have told what might be passing in him; his thought was deep, but none could have said it was painful. After some moments, he lifted his head, and his voice was clear and serene :

“Before giving you my promise, you must give me yours to one thing—your love for Lucille is genuine?”

“It is, so help me God!”

“Sufficiently so to concede what I should exact in the event of your becoming her husband (I speak to you now, of course, not as your friend, but as one who fills her father’s office), namely, that you would relinquish and give me your word never to rejoin political risks and intrigues? I could not consent to

place her peace in the hands of one who would unavoidably jeopardise it by hazarding his own safety—for a Patriot is but a Conspirator if he fail. You would do this?"

Valdor hesitated a moment; his political creed was portion of his very blood and life, and the ardent Henri Cinquiste revolted from condemning himself to the inaction from which he could not rouse his party; but the stronger ardour of a new-born passion prevailed at last; he bent his head:

"I would, I swear to you. And now, Strathmore, may I seek *your* word, that you will guard my hope from being destroyed during my absence, and will say to her of my love all I would myself have said to-night!"

"Yes, I will do so."

His voice was tranquil and passionless; it had no inflexion of reluctance, but equally none of willingness or friendship; it was simply the assent of a man who undertakes a duty, but it also bore with it the unmistakable assurance of an honour which will unfailingly execute its word once pledged. And that assurance Valdor recognised; he stretched out his hand, a grateful light gleaming in his eyes, with unwonted emotion:

"Thank you from my soul! You have relieved me of all fear, for I know, Strathmore, that though those who trust to your mercy may be in danger, those who trust to your honour are safe. In a brief while I shall return to claim Lucille at your hands."

He spoke in the thoughtless candour, the transparent warmth, of his own heart ; the shadow which fell across his listener's face from the swaying palm-trees above hid from him the light which, for a second, leapt to Strathmore's eyes, like the sudden flash of steel in the gloom. But Strathmore gave him his hand, and bade him good speed—and without falsity. He would be no traitor ; he would keep true faith with this man, since it was this man whom Lucille loved.

As Valdor left the conservatories, he saw a spray of lilies of the valley fallen from Lucille's dress, natural flowers preserved by some peculiar art ; he recognised them, and, stooping, took them up ; for this new love of the French noble had something of the knightly reverence of old. He put the flowers in his breast, and went out into the night ; his heart was heavy with the pain of enforced absence, but it was warm with hope and with the firm belief of love returned, belief he would never have so cherished but for the testimony of Strathmore—a testimony he felt instinctively was sincere because unwilling ; and he thought of her tenderly, longingly, trustfully, while he looked back at the grey, stately, melancholy pile of White Ladies.

He whom he had quitted, pledged to fulfil the office trusted to his honour, stood for awhile motionless beside the lotus-fountain, his hand clenched hard on its marble rim. An evil of which he had never dreamed

uncurled about him up from the poisoned ashes of dead years; a contest which he had never foreseen nor feared was before him through which to wrestle; —and he was no coward, no traitor. He could not shrink from that which lay before him, he could not sacrifice the life he had sworn at all cost to preserve joyous, and knowing not pain, only to secure to himself a selfish and barren desire—the brute desire of the man who, banned from a treasure, destroys it, rather than let it drift, blessing and blessed, into the lives of others.

For awhile he stood motionless there, with his hand pressed on the marble where the young girl's brow had lain; then, with swift uneven steps at first, later on with a harder, firmer tread, as though treading down the accursed shapes which rose about him to torture and to tempt, he walked to and fro the pathway bordered and shaded with the palms. This man—whom his associates deemed callous to all pain, as the bronze to which they likened him, and who in his arrogance had held that life was a thing to be moulded at will, defiant of deity or man, of death or circumstance—suffered a fearful doom, such an one as purer souls or gentler natures never know.

Once, as he paced there in the midnight solitude, he looked up at the drooping and curled leaves of the palms above, and a bitter smile came on his lips.

“ The emblems that fools choose of Peace, they are

fitting in **MY** house! Peace! peace!—there is none! Oh, God, is there peace in the grave?—or does science, that knows we rot, lie as well as nescience that babbles of our resurrection? Is there peace there—dull, dreamless peace—or in death must we even *remember!*"

And in the heart-sick mockery there was a misery greater than lies in grief.

## CHAPTER II.

## CAN OBLIVION BE BOUGHT ?

STRATHMORE had an accepted duty to perform, and from what he had once set before himself he never shrank nor paused. With as little mercy as he drove the steel into the souls of others, he drove it into his own when occasion arose ; self-love and self-reliance were dominant in him, but self-pity he disdained, as the weakness of the coward. It was for Lucille's sake that he had given the pledge extracted from him the night before ; it was for Lucille's sake that he prepared to fulfil it rigidly and to the uttermost letter, not grudgingly, nor with constraint moreover, but with a complete and unfaltering justice to the man who had trusted him.

And on the morrow he was braced to his ordeal. He was victorious, and ready to carry through what he had appointed to himself ; what he had once elected

to do he was strong to do, whether it were to inflict or to endure.

It was noon, and the windows of his private library stood open to a shady and secluded part of the gardens, with the Western sea beyond the deer forests.

He sat alone, writing the history entrusted to him ; delicacy to her, not distrust to himself, prompting him to relate it thus, for Strathmore, “weaker in many things, stronger in a few,” having once selected that which he had to do, was of the stuff to thrust his arm into the flame unblenching, and hold it there till it had consumed without a sign of pain.

So he wrote—wrote the truth in every iota of what had passed between him and the man who loved her. A calm letter, leaving no doubt unjust to the absent, withholding no expression which could assure her she was beloved by him, speaking of him as he deserved as one not faultless without doubt, but as a generous and chivalrous gentleman, finally leaving her free to be happy in his love if she would, with such kind and thoughtful words of personal tenderness for her own peace as became his position towards her—such as her father, had he lived, might have penned to her on the turning-point of her young life. The writing had the firm and delicate clearness of his habitual hand ; the words were gentle to her, and just in the uttermost to the absent ; the style was courtly, lucid, terse ; there was not a trace that its composition had cost him anything, or that any feeling moved him

save solicitude for her welfare and her future. Yet, when it was done, the dew stood upon his forehead as on the brow of a man who has passed through some great peril, and his head sank down till it rested on the writing-table—he felt as though the curse of his past were rising around him with its sensual murderous vapour, and stifling his life like poisonous fumes.

“It is just—it is just,” he muttered, “that I should surrender her to the one who was with me when I slew him! Retribution—is there retribution? Only for cravens and fools! Do I grow a coward as well as a traitor?”

He flung the letter from him, and rose and went to the open casement, where the fresh west wind of the morning was blowing among the thick ivy which clung to the mullions. He wanted to shake from him what had newly assailed him. Strathmore was of the world, and one amongst its rulers; his deity was power, the essence of his life dominance, and that which weakened or undermined his strength he would have cut out by the roots and torn from him, no matter at what cost. Anguish might fasten on his solitary hours, remorse might seize the brief watches of the night, but it was unknown by men. As the Iron Cardinal wore the shirt of penance under the velvets and furs of his pontifical robes, and had the coarse pallet laid unseen under his sumptuous bed, so Strathmore kept his sin unforgotten, to torment him as it would, but never let it be seen of the world, or

strike his ambition from his public life, and from his future hold. Like Ximenes he scourged himself, but he ruled others.

As he stood there he saw Lucille. She was feeding one of the pet fawns with rose-leaves, only a few yards from him ; and in the fall of the lashes over the eyes, the smile upon the lips, the whole attitude with which her head drooped, and she held the leaves to the little animal, there was something of weariness and dejection. Possibly, he thought, she had heard of Valdor's departure, though as yet, thus early in the day, it had not become generally known among the numerous guests at White Ladies.

Turning, she saw him, and the rose-leaves fell from her hand ; she came to him with the gladness and grace of her habitual greeting, fleet as the fawn which followed her, ringing its silver bells ; but the flush, which he had seen for the first time by the lotus-fountain, came on her face, her steps lingered more slowly as she drew nearer to him, and she did not lift her face for the caress which she was used to receive as a child receives her father's. The new love had already stolen her from him ; the shadow of estrangement had already fallen between them.

“ Have you anything you wish to say to me, Lucille ? ” he asked, gently, as he advanced to meet her with the graceful courtesy habitual to him to all women, but which to her alone was not unreal. He asked the question with some anxiety, some hope ;

he would, fain have kept, at least, her free and fearless confidence, it was difficult to him to believe that she had so soon learned to treasure thoughts too dear him to share.

She lifted her eyes with something of wonder mingled with their shyness.

“ No—nothing.”

He dropped her hand, and was silent a moment, while she stood beside him stroking the lifted head of the fawn.

“ Do not think that I wish to force your confidence, my dear,” he went on, gently still, “ but I should be glad of a few minutes alone with you. Will you come into the library now ? ”

He held open the glass door for her to pass through ; but she shrank back, something of the startled fear with which she had fled from him the night just passed came on her face again.

“ You wish me ? —now ? ”

The reluctance stung him to the soul.

“ Certainly not, if you be unwilling. It is no matter.”

Strathmore re-entered the library saying no more ; he let no living creature disobey him, but to her he would not use coercion, not even command, and he left her, lest she—who knew not the blow she dealt—should wring from him one stern or bitter word. From such she was as sacred to him as are the dead to the living : he would no more have raised his

voice harshly to her than we would raise our hand to strike some hallowed and beloved face that lies within its coffin.

As he took up his letter, and sealed and addressed it, standing with his back to the windows, he did not hear her follow him, he did not see her at his side, till he felt her lips touch his hand, and started at the caress to meet her eyes raised wistful and pleading to his own.

“Lord Cecil, did I displease you? Are you angry with me?”

“I could not know anger to you, Lucille.”

“But you looked coldly at me—your words are not like your own. Are you sure I have not vexed you?”

He stooped to her; and the clear, inflexible voice, which never softened for mercy, nor faltered for pain, nor altered in welcome or invective, in courtesy or in mockery, but was ever tranquil and icy alike to friend or foe, quivered slightly as he did so:

“Lucille, once for all believe me; you can only pain me if I see you pained; you will most truly obey me, most truly rejoice me, by showing me that your heart has not an ungratified wish, nor your life a single sorrow. There is a letter lying there I wish you to read: do not hasten to answer it, to-morrow will be ample time for that—to-morrow at this hour.”

His lips touched her cheek in his usual farewell, and he quitted the library.

She sank into his chair, and her head drooped, as

the sunlight, slanting in through the ivy leaves, fell on her brow, while her lips were slightly parted in dreaming thought; not wholly the childlike thought, poetic but unshadowed, with which she had gazed over the seas at Silver-rest, more restless, more vague, more troubled at itself.

“How good he is!—so great, so powerful, so famous, yet so untiring for me,” she whispered, below her breath. “Pain him? Oh, how could any ever pain him, or disobey his lightest word? That guilty woman, who forsook him in the past, how could she ever betray such a heart as his? Perhaps her memory is bitter to him still; perhaps he has never loved another as he loved her!”

And the burden of those long-buried years, of that veiled past, she did not know, already cast its first faint shadow over Lucille, where she sat with her head bowed, and her eyes unconsciously tracing the path across the skies, of an autumn flight of swallows, winging their way to cross the golden land where her father’s grave was laid, and the pine-covered mountains of her mother’s Hungarian home, on towards Syrian air and Cashmere citron-groves.

Some moments had passed when she remembered the letter he had bade her read; she took it up without interest till she recognised his writing, then she opened it in eagerness, all that her guardian did or said was sacred to her. She would have disbelieved the witness of the universe if it had bid her see a

stain upon the character whose very indifference to others only served to make her feel the more his constant gentleness to herself.

She opened his letter with eagerness; but as she read, the colour left her cheeks, a look of wondering pain came into her eyes, and at its close her face lost all its warmth and light; she pushed back the hair from her brow with a movement of startled disquiet, and her lips trembled. She sat silent, gazing down on the clear writing and dispassionate words; she was very young, and the love proffered to and pressed on her had little other effect upon her than that of wonder and something of repulsion, she had no need of it, no wish for it, and it had almost a terror for her. Phrases in this letter, moreover—those very phrases which most expressed solicitude for her welfare, and did most justice to Valdor's claims and story—smote her with a deeper pain. She felt for the solitary time in her bright, brief life, wounded, stricken, left alone.

“Is he weary of me, that it would give him pleasure to exile me to another life?”

It was this thought which made the mist gather between her eyes, and the wheeling flight of the swallows in the sun; this thought which brought over her face a look which it had never worn in her sunny life—a look of that pain from which Strathmore, for the sake of the dead, had set his will to guard her, as though he held the making and the marring, the warp and the woof, of that tangled web

of Fate which is woven by hazard in the shadow of a dark uncertainty, and is not to be coloured or riven by the art or the strength of man.

“Lucille! what is it that has grieved you?”

She started, and looked up in the sunlight. Before her stood young Caryll, whom she had sent for rose-leaves for the fawn; the boy’s face was troubled at the shadow upon hers, and his frank eyes shone with the love he was forbade to speak, and in which she, used to tenderness from her youngest years from all, and specially from him, never dreamt of danger. “All things loved her,” as she had once said in her early infancy; and of another love than this affection which had always surrounded her, of the passion which her beauty awakened, or of the misery which it might cause, Lucille was utterly unconscious. Her life and her education had been such as to leave her, far longer than most, the guilelessness and purity of her childhood. It would be long ere the world could teach such a mind, grosser taint or darker knowledge; it would shake off the evil lessons as a bird’s wing shakes the night dews.

“What has grieved you, Lucille?” the young man repeated, as he knelt before her.

“Nothing; at least—I do not know,” she answered, slowly, while she pushed the hair from her temples with a certain heat and weariness.

“Something has,” he persisted. “Perhaps my uncle——”

Her face was flushed with light in an instant, and her eyes turned on him with rebuke :

“ Nello ! for shame—hush ! When was Lord Cecil ever otherwise than generous and gentle and kind for *me* ? ”

The youth set his teeth hard ; with the keen insight of jealous love, he feared none of his brilliant rivals who circled about her, free to whisper what they would, while his own lips were sealed to silence, as he feared this graceful and loyal devotion to the man whose years were double his, who stood in her father’s place, and whose cold, world-worn, inflexible character looked to Lionel Caryll one which no feeling had ever touched, nor weakness ever smitten.

“ Oh, Lucille, Lucille ! ” he said, with bitterness, for it was a cruel ordeal to chain down his words to go no further than his honour had pledged, “ have a few weeks changed you so, that you have forgotten all the years from your infancy, and will not even share what grieves you with one whom you used at least to trust and love as a brother ? ”

She looked down on him surprised and regretful ; the change was not that she gave less, but that he longed for more, and she wondered, self-reproachingly, how she had wounded him.

“ Dear Nello, you *are* my brother, and I am not altered—not altered in one shadow ! I could never change to those I love.”

“ And I am among them ? ”

His voice trembled, his heart beat loud ; it was

difficult not to pray with all his soul and strength for *one* love greater than all the rest, but it was much to keep his hold on the silver cord of her child-memories. Her hand strayed among the waves of his hair, while the eyes that were clear with the single-hearted loyalty of youth gazed up into her own, and the swift sunlit smile that was her heritage from her father lighted her face ; it seemed to her so absurd that he could doubt she loved him, her playmate, her favourite, her brother !

“Nello ! it is you who are changed ! You never asked those foolish, useless questions at Silver-rest ! You know I love you dearly, very dearly. None will ever love you better than Lucille.”

She spoke with the consoling, caressing affection of a loving child to one whom she fears, while she wonders how, she may have wounded, and the young man’s frank, tell-tale face gleamed with the light of hope and youth ; the love of his years, if reverential and poetic, has much of the element of worship, and is quickly gladdened by a little, unlike the fierce, imperious, egotistic passion which, if it have not all, has nothing. He thanked her with joyous, tender words, which he found hard to rein in to the limits of his promise, and led her out into the sunlight.

“I see nothing of you, Lucille, here,” he pleaded. “Give me this morning alone, as though we were at Silver-rest.”

She hesitated a moment, listening ; it was to the roll of carriages taking Strathmore and several of the

men to a meeting twenty miles away, which, as Lord-Lieutenant of the county, he had promised to head. Then she went with Caryll where he liked, her guardian's letter lying on her heart, and lying—she knew not why—with a dull pain there.

The park was very beautiful in the autumn noon, with surge and beach, cloud and sunshine, golden woods and winding waters, all molten together in the amber light, and they wandered where chance led them. To her, to whom the brown chesnuts in her path, the sweep of a flight of deer, the glance of the ocean through an avenue of forest-trees were poems, all life, all nature were full of beauty; and he had no world but in her face, and knew no music but her voice.

They came at last to the small, grey, mediæval church of White Ladies, ancient as the Abbey, with dim storied windows, and Gothic walls all wreathed and darkened with ivy scarce less old. It stood shut in with foliage, and singularly still and peaceful, with the sheen of the sea gleaming below through its trees, and the lulling of the waves making solemn melancholy requiem over the buried dead.

“Hush! it is so beautiful!” she whispered to him, as if the sound of his voice jarred on her in breaking the silence, while her face reflected the tender and holy memories of the place, as it reflected all such things but too deeply. “Listen! the sea itself murmurs softly and low, as though it were afraid to wake them. It is not death *here*, in the stillness,

in the sunlight, under those shady leaves—it is only sleep!"

He was silent, gazing on her as her eyes filled with a reverent tenderness and a softened light, as they looked far and wistfully, beyond the beauty round her, into those sublime and mournful mysteries of life and death, in which the poetic spiritual mind had wandered away where his could not follow.

"I love the German name, God's Acre," she said, softly, after long silence. "It seems to say that while the world is only busy with the living, and so soon forgets its best when they are gone, He loves, and has garnered, the lost."

"Do not speak of those things, Lucille; death seems too brutal a thing to remember with *you*."

The youth felt, as all felt in her presence, something more tender than awe, more vague than fear, as looking upon a flower whose brilliance is too delicate and fragile to bloom long on earth, a sunshine too shadowless and too pure to be long lent of heaven. She smiled a little dreamily, and her hands wandered among the long waving grasses and coils of ivy, putting them tenderly aside from the nearest grave, whose single grey stone they had overgrown in their luxuriance; and, as she did so, she traced the moss-veiled letters of the inscription, which was but one word only—

### **Lucille.**

She gave a low, startled cry :

"Oh, Sister! look—it is my name."

Young Gayll bent over her, startled and ~~more~~ than ~~more~~ a slight coincidence warranted: it gave him an instant of pain to see the name he loved ~~graven~~ in a tomb, and in the sequestered village church-yard, where none but the peasantry had been buried century after century, save where the ~~left~~ ~~name~~ name of the great race of White Ladies ~~was~~ is ~~was~~ ~~now~~ ~~now~~ strange and foreign to find there.

"Yours! Who can it be? There is no case," he said, as he swept the grasses farther off the low ~~monument~~.

"First! Perhaps she died young, and they laid her here with only the name by which they had loved her; and it told all to them, though nothing to us. Ah! death is cruel, desolate, sorrowful! The sun is warm, the sea is calm, the birds are singing, and she lies there alone!"

Her voice was hushed, and her eyes were filled with a sad and tender light, as she wound the foliage reverently about the tomb, leaving clear the name that was her own, the name which touched her strangely, found on this unknown and lonely grave, which she knew not as the grave of her mother. Her temperament was vividly susceptible and deeply tinged with the reflective sadness which usually marks imaginative natures, and Lucille, to whom, personally, sorrow was but a name, felt for all things that suffered, for all who were lonely and in pain, with a divine and yearning pity. Life in her hands

was a beautiful wonder-flower, just unclosing without a soil on its white virginal leaves, and the richest gold in its calix still hidden like the amber stamen of the half-opened lily. It seemed so cruel to her that there should be any for whom that beautiful flower was bruised and broken, and left colourless and crushed, and without fragrance, to be flung at the last into the darkened solitude of a closed grave !

And she sat silent, her hand still wandering over the foliage that covered the carved letters of her own name, while at her feet the wide blue sea lay shining in the light, and the honest, tender eyes of Lionel Caryll gazed upward to the face which he had loved from childhood. But her thoughts were not with him as she looked far away through the shady leaves of the church elms over the sunny waters : they were with the unknown life which lay buried and lonely beneath the moss, and with the words of the letter, which rested on her heart with a vague and heavy pain.

Strathmore returned late. He came and addressed a few courtly, gentle words to her, according to his custom, but he did not even with a look seek to learn the effect which Valdor's love had had upon her as he approached her.

“ This day has been like an Indian summer ! How have you spent it, my dear ? ”

He noted that her cheeks flushed and her eyes drooped at his presence.

“ In the park with Nello. The air was so lovely ! And—Oh, Lord Cecil ! ”—her face was raised now, and her eyes full of wistful inquiry—“ there is a grave here, in White Ladies, with my name, ‘ Lucille,’ on the stone—only that ! Whose was it ? Do you know ? ”

“ Your name ? Had it any date ? ”

“ No ; nothing but the one word.”

He smiled a little ; and even his mother, who knew the history of that grave, could not see any look on his face save some slight amusement with the marvel of youth at the ordinary trifles it meets.

“ Were you abroad, Lucille, you would see your name on many graves, though it is an uncommon one here. Several French refugees came to White Ladies, I know, in '89 ; possibly it belonged to one of them. The stone bore no date, you say ? Now, your wandering fancy can dream a mournful story of exile and of severance, and weave an idyl from that single word ! ”

Those around them laughed ; she smiled ; the explanation she never doubted, yet the remembrance of that lonely grave lying beneath the waving grasses and the ivy coils, with its incessant requiem chanted by the melancholy seas, saddened her still ; and Nello Caryll, as he listened, felt vaguely and causelessly, that in some way or other that nameless tomb under the shadow of the old monastic church was one of the links which bound Strathmore to the young girl, Lucille.

The day had been like an Indian summer, but its warmth and serenity had been treacherous. It had become very chilly as the evening drew near; the "wild white horses" of the sea dashed in, flinging high their snowy foam; dark, ominous clouds drifted before the wind as the sun went down; and the fisher-people farther down the coast looked up and saw the sure heralds of the coming storm, as the grey gulls and curlews flew with a shrill scream over the angry waters.

In the same hour while the tempest was rising to break over the ocean and the beach, the forests and the hills, of White Ladies, a steamer was ploughing its swift way across the Channel, running fast before the gale to reach the French coast ere the night and the storm were down; and Valdor leant against the side of the vessel with the little delicate lilies of the valley close against his heart. He was on a perilous mission; his name had become suspected, all but proscribed, by the existing government, a trifl<sup>e</sup> made known of his present errand, and he might be "detained," or worse: and yet his thoughts were bright and trustful ones, for the chivalrous nature of the Legitimist Noble knew nothing of the craven hesitance of fear, and—he loved and he thought himself loved.

"A rough night coming on, but we shall be in port in half an hour," said a voice beside him.

Valdor started from his reverie with a courteous "*Plait il, monsieur;*" and as he raised his head saw a tall, bronzed, soldierly man, whose face seemed to

him familiar. The recognition was mutual, though indefinite, on both sides.

“Pardon me, but we surely have met before, though I cannot recal your name,” said the Englishman. “I am Colonel Marchmont, Queen’s Bays——”

“Whom I think I had the honour of knowing very well in Paris years ago; is it not so?” said Valdor, as he gave his own name, and acknowledged the acquaintance. “Surely the last time I had the pleasure of seeing you we acted together in an affair of honour?”

“Ah! ages ago,” said Marchmont. “To be sure, I remember now; a shocking affair, when that incarnate brute, Strathmore, killed poor Erroll. I beg your pardon for calling him so; no doubt he is a friend of yours still.”

“A very valued one.”

“Then I offer you many apologies, but the words slipped out,” said the soldier, puffing Havannah smoke from under his long grey moustaches. “I have killed off plenty of men myself in the field, but there was something I didn’t like in that affair; it was cold and deadly; one saw he ‘meant murder’ by his eye. They’d lived like brothers, and he shot him like a dog, and felt as little remorse afterwards! I dare say Strathmore’s forgot the whole matter, hasn’t he?”

“I have never heard him allude to it, nor any one else, for many years.”

“No doubt. The world soon forgets, especially what its great men like to have forgotten. He is a wonderfully successful statesman; his politics are not mine, but there is no denying his power.”

“ He is the most able man of your country ; he was always ‘plus fin que tous les autres’ in diplomacy,” answered Valdor, as his hand wandered in the breast of his coat, where the fragrant lilies were hidden ; “ but you wrong him if you imagine him brutal. Cold he is, and when he is aroused, perhaps dangerous, still he has generous, and, indeed, great qualities. But you were intimate friends with Erroll, perhaps ? ”

“ Poor fellow, yes ! We were in the same corps.”

“ Do you know if he had any relatives ? ” Valdor’s hand was on the lily-sprays, and a vague instinct connected in his thoughts the memory of Lucille with the memory of the dead man.

“ None, I think, except old Sir Arthur, and some cousin or other, who had the baronetcy.”

“ There was no one to mourn him, then ? ”

“ Nobody, except—all who knew him ! He left me a letter for Strathmore, and one for a woman in England, if I remember right ; that was all.”

“ A woman ! Who was she ? ”

His hand was on the flowers, and he felt a sudden, keen, breathless impatience, as though it were closing on the thread of the mystery which he had always felt encircled the life he loved, and connected her with him whom the world saw as her guardian.

“ Haven’t an idea,” answered the Englishman. “ Some lady-love or other, I suppose.”

“ Do you remember her name, monsieur ? ”

“ No, it is so many years ago. I fancy it was something foreign ; but I recollect he addressed his

letter to her at White Ladies. I remember that, because it was Strathmore's place, and poor Bertie was often down there."

"Would you know the name if you heard it?"

"I might."

"Was it De Vocqsal?"

Marchmont thought a moment.

"Eh? I don't know. I think it was. Yes, I am almost sure. Why?"

"Only because I had a fancy of my own about a story of his past, and I was curious to know if I were right. How the wind is rising; but there are the Boulogne lights. Are you going to Paris?"

"Yes, but only en route for a little farther; to India, for the next ten years, perhaps, if those mountain robbers go on worrying us," answered the soldier, too careless and too indifferent to the matter to wonder why Valdor had any interest in the past history of his long dead friend. Soon afterwards he was called to the cabin, where his wife, but lately wedded, had taken refuge, and Valdor was left alone, leaning on the rail of the ship, while his eyes watched the phosphor light flashing on the crested waves, and his hand held the lilies of the valley as though holding the pledge of a fair future in those delicate, withered sprays.

His pulses beat quicker—he had learned Strathmore's secret! That which every forethought had environed, every care veiled, every prudence and expedient concealed beyond reach of sight; that

which had been buried for ever in the graves of the dead, in a sepulchre whose seal no human hand was to break, lest the poisoned miasma should escape to touch with its taint the young and innocent, had come into his power. Dark, uncertain, shadowy as the past still was, he knew enough to know what was the link which fettered Strathmore to the fragile tenure of a dawning life, in so strange an union ; what was the knotted cord of expiation worn beneath the chain armour, and the broidered velvet, of public ambition, and of worldly fame, by the man whom the world deemed remorse never smote. He had unearthed Strathmore's secret, and he forgot how pitiless to those who braved him, how unscrupulous where his passions were roused, or his will was opposed, how intolerant alike of those who stood in his path, or entrenched on his power, was one whom nature had made inflexible, whom a woman had made cruel, and whom the world had made merciless. He only felt :

*“ I will never tell her ; his remorse is sacred, his secret shall be safe with me.”*

And the French Noble thought with a generous pity, a noble faith, of the man whose atonement he had learnt, as in the shadow of the night he lifted the frail fragrant lilies of the valley to his lips, and kissed them reverently, like some hallowed relic, as he leaned over the dark angry waters while the vessel bore her way to France.

## CHAPTER III.

“MORITURI TE SALUTANT!”

IT was near midnight; the fires were warm and the lights bright in the cedar drawing-room at White Ladies, flashing on the silver and azure panellings, the countless trifles of art and luxury, the clusters of exotica, and the delicate hues of the women's jewels and dresses. Some were playing chess or *écarté*, some softly flirting, some talking of sport and some of slander, while the clear contralto of Lady Chessville echoed from the music-room beyond, where she and her idolators were singing the music of “Figaro,” which they would perform on the morrow in the private theatre.

Within, it was brilliant, still, peaceful, with no sound higher than the murmur of voices attuned to one soft, languid key, which never varied in pain or in pleasure, in repartee, flattery, or spleen. Without, the winds were rising shrill and high among the

old monastic woods, and the lightning was swirling about the fretted pinnacles of the Abbey, and in the lull of the music the hollow, angry roar of the seas, answering the challenge of the storm, pealed through the silence. It was a rough night on the coast.

“Bad night out,” said the Earl of Fernneley, with a suppressed yawn, as a blaze of lightning flashed through the length of the drawing-rooms, outdazzling the wax-lights.

“Plenty of casualties,” suggested Sir Philip D’Orvâl.

“All the better for wreckers, they thank Heaven for foul weather!” said a pretty woman, castling her adversary’s queen, and nestling herself in her causeuse to await his next move.

“Wreckers! You touch our *esprit du corps*, Lady Adela. We are all Ministerialists here,” said Johnnie Vaux, a whip and a wit.

A languid but general laugh gave him the answer that flattered him most, as a minute gun was fired, faintly heard in the pauses of the thunder, but not stopping the cards, the chess, or the flirtations.

“Many lives lost off your coast in the year, Strathmore?” asked the Prince de Volms.

“Scores, I believe,” answered Strathmore, with negligent indifference, as he pursued his *ecarté* with D’Orvâl.

“Pray don’t talk about it, then; it is terrible!” cried a Spanish beauty, with a shiver of her fan, drawing her perfumed lace about her.

Strathmore laughed his slight, gentle laugh :  
“*Je n'en vois pas la terreur, madame !* Men must die, it doesn't much matter *how*. If casualties, epidemics, and wars didn't take off our surplus population at intervals, we should soon be overrun. Nothing is more superfluous than those romantic laments for most convenient laws of nature ! I mark the king, D'Orvâl.”

Another signal of distress broke on the ear, muffled by the moaning winds, as he turned to pursue his game. With the proficiency of old, he brought the same skill and the same rules to cards as to the Cabinet, and won in both.

He had been perfectly sincere in what he had just said. His political economy taught him its truth. He had a profound indifference for mankind ; loss of life did not concern him ; with a cold, but correct, philosophy, he held that a thousand people killed by an accident, a battle, or an endemic, mattered no more in the aggregate, and was, therefore, as indifferent to men of sense, as the butchery of a thousand sheep in the shambles.

As he looked up to deal the last game he glanced across the room, and saw the gaze of Lucille fixed on him. Her eyes watched him under their long lashes with something of wonder, of reproach, of sorrow, mingled with their earnest and reverent tenderness ; to *her* he never spoke such words, to *her* this side of his character was never shown, and at its pitilessness her heart which loved every living thing down to the

lowliest flower, and grieved for the broken wing of a bird, felt a shuddering incredulity and pain: death would have been sweeter, and more mercy to her, than to have found an error or a stain in him. And that gaze, as he met it, was so like that which had dwelt on him in compassionate pardon, in mute reproach, while the sun sank down upon his wrath, that the life his hand had taken smote his conscience with the sudden memory of irrevocable crime.

He played the game out—played, and won with unchanged science and skill, or he had not been Strathmore;—then, crossing the drawing-rooms, he approached her.

"You look sad, Lucille. Are you afraid of the storm?"

She sat a little apart, no one was near at the moment, and she lifted her eyes to his as his hand lay on her shoulder:

"Afraid? Oh no! I was thinking of the people out at sea, and of their misery. You only said that in jest; you would save them, I know, if you could? It is so terrible to sit in light and gaiety and comfort while the ships are perishing?—it seems like guilt to be careless and rejoicing while others suffer, and death is close at hand? There is something so fearful in life taken!"

His hand dropped from her shoulder—the hand which had "taken life"—and, stricken by those words, he went out away from the light, the murmur,

Strathmore laughed his slight, gentle laugh :

*— Je n'en vois pas la terreur, madame !* Men must die, it doesn't much matter *how*. If casualties, epidemics, and wars didn't take off our surplus population at intervals, we should soon be overrun. Nothing is more superfluous than those romantic laments for most convenient laws of nature ! I mark the king, D'Orval."

Another signal of distress broke on the ear, muffled by the moaning winds, as he turned to pursue his game. With the proficiency of old, he brought the same skill and the same rules to cards as to the Cabinet, and won in both.

He had been perfectly sincere in what he had just said. His political economy taught him its truth. He had a profound indifference for mankind ; loss of life did not concern him ; with a cold, but correct, philosophy, he held that a thousand people killed by an accident, a battle, or an endemic, mattered no more in the aggregate, and was, therefore, as indifferent to men of sense, as the butchery of a thousand sheep in the shambles.

As he looked up to deal the last game he glanced across the room, and saw the gaze of Lucille fixed on him. Her eyes watched him under their long lashes with something of wonder, of reproach, of sorrow, mingled with their earnest and reverent tenderness ; to her he never spoke such words, to her this side of his character was never shown, and at its pitilessness her heart which loved every living thing down to the

...LITERATE  
where I was, I grieved  
that it was nothing more  
would have been sweeter, if  
than to have found an error  
that ~~now~~ ~~we~~ met it, the  
well as in a compass  
would while the sun sank  
the ~~is~~ ~~is~~ man had taken  
the ~~would~~ ~~would~~ memory of it.

He passed the game  
~~unconscious~~ existence and  
~~unconscious~~ then, over  
unconscious use.

He was sad, but

He was little apart.  
He lifted her

He said: "Oh no! I am going to the  
other end of their ~~lives~~. You only said  
you would save them. I know, if you can  
It is terrible to sit in light and misery and  
the things are perishing!—it seems like  
and rejoicing while others ~~and~~  
with a ~~house~~ at hand? There is something ~~and~~  
He said.

His man ~~had~~ dropped from her shoulder the  
"you ~~had~~ taken life"—and, stricken by the  
was ~~out~~ away from the light, the man

the music; out into the solitude of the dark and stormy night.

No rain was falling, and the night was still, save when the winds, sweeping up through the forests, shrieked and moaned upon the air, and the noise of the waves arose with a hollow roar, like desert beasts seeking their prey. The ringed lightning, whirling down the sky, lit up the black masses of woodland and the ruins of the cloisters where the graves of the dead Dominicans lay; and at intervals, above the tumult of the wind and sea, the signal of distress broke faintly, and then died away.

He stood on the terrace, looking seaward, his head uncovered, his eyes meeting the blaze that was laden with death or blindness, braving the fury of the storm as he had braved the curse of God and Man. Its wild work rioted unnoticed, unfelt, around him; one of those dark hours was upon him of which the world never knew, when the pride of an arrogant and egotistic philosophy was rent asunder, and the throes of an undying remorse possessed the soul which knew itself but the more deeply damned because the loftiness of intellect by which it was companioned left it no plea of the dullard's brute ignorance, or the murderer's coarse apathy, in its crime. He had wrought his guilt wittingly, deliberately, and, though trodden down from memory by an iron heel, and forgotten through long stretches of time in the pursuit of power, in these hours—rare, solitary, horrible as those hours in which the men of earlier ages, passion-riven,

deemed themselves fiend-possessed—it rose from the coiled and slumbering past, and twisted round him as the serpents round the Laocoön.

Rare, but the more terrible for their rarity, these hours came upon him. He lived again through the commission of his crime ; he heard the sullen splashing of the pestilential waters ; he saw on his right hand the luminous glory of the sun ; he watched the last-drawn breath shiver through the dying limbs, while the white and quivering lips gasped their last words of pardon : “I forgive—I forgive!—he did not know—” Pardon even in the throes of death ! And the love that he had borne him, the love of youth’s rejoicing brotherhood, uprose before him in all its glad communion, and the very earth beneath, the very air about him, seemed to call for vengeance for that guiltless life hurled into a brutal grave !

Arrogant to the living, before the memory of his sin he bowed, prostrate, stricken, accursed in his own sight. For his work was *irrevocable* : and in its despair, its fruitless yearning, its hopeless impotence, remorse looked mockery, expiation blasphemy.

What is done, is done for all eternity.

He stood looking seaward, while the thunder echoed from hill to hill, and the roar of the deep rose hoarse and sullen to its call, and as the wild winds lashed and moaned about him, his eyes looked up, and met the lightning unquailing. The great lost soul of this man, which knew a supreme remorse, but was never smitten with a craven’s fear, found the echo of

its own agony in the throes of earth and heaven, and from his lips broke a bitter cry, lost in the beating of the storm :

“ Oh God ! release me from my guilt ! ”

In the silence, as the tempest lulled and the winds sank to rise again in deadlier wrath, there echoed from the ocean raging below, the piteous signal, and the prayer for human aid, of men in their last extremity, perishing nigh at hand. He heard it, standing there, looking down into the darkness with his face towards the sea ; and as from the night around him there arose that faint and weary moan of mortal misery, his conscience whispered, “ Let the hand which took life save it. So may its sin be redeemed ! ”

Then as men obey an imperative command, he bowed his head and went through the tumult of the storm down towards the sea.

In the dark-arched portal of the door leading from the western wing, gazing at him with the loyalty of her innocent love, while the wind drowned and wafted from her ear the cry to God of her father’s destroyer, stood Lucille. Unseen and inspired by that instinct which lends courage to the weak and strength to the frail, she had followed him through passage and corridor to the silent and deserted western wing of the Abbey. The bright and delicate figure was strangely framed in the grey stone of the pointed archway ; her eyes looked wistfully out into the weird darkness of the night ; her hair gleamed golden in the flame which played about it ; fragile, imaginative,

impressible, fearful in much, the storm had no terror for her, its grandeur had been the music which had filled her heart with its own solemnity in earliest childhood, and to which she had loved to listen as to the sublime rhythm of a Miltonic poem. Moreover into danger or death she would have followed Strathmore without pause or fear.

When he bowed his head and went down towards the sea through the winds and the gloom, she left the archway of the door, and silently and softly pursued his steps over the mossy ground, strewn with rent boughs, and fallen fir-cones, along the steep and winding path which led to the beach. The gusts loosened her hair and tossed it floating on the air, the thunder of the skies and waters echoed from hill to hill, the lightnings made their mad war about her feet. Still she went on—she whom the storm could destroy as it destroyed the fairy-bells of the forest lily—went on without fear, for she followed him.

### A wild night!

A night to drown death shrieks like the cry of a curlew, and play with men's lives as with wisps of straw. A night with the black seas yawning in fathomless graves, and the hissing of the surge, filling every moment that the thunder lulled. No rain fell; the air was hot and arid; the dense clouds looked to stoop and touch the wave where it rose, a mighty wall of water, mountain high. A darkness impenetrable brooded over land and sea, when the

lightning ceased for some brief second, and when it blazed afresh the heavens were filled with its flame that lit up the white stretch of beach, the Titan rocks that glittered, steel-like, in its light, the vast Druidic forests of the Abbey stretching westward, and the boiling, seething, roaring abyss, where the sea devoured its dead in the horror of night, to smile calm and sunny in the morning dawn, when its work would be done, and its prey rot below, with the sand in their eyes and the salt weeds in their hair, and the nameless things of the deep creeping over their limbs—over the childish brow that had been flushed warm with sleep a few hours before, over the long floating tresses that had been played with by a mother's hand, over the lips which had been sought in the bridal softness of a good-night caress. For the sea is fellow-reaper with death, and, like his comrade, will not spare, for youth, or love, or pity, for childhood's cry, or mother's prayer, or gallant strength of manhood.

It was a wild night. The wind rose in sudden blasts swift and fierce as a simoon, sweeping down from the wooded heights of the ancient monastery over the darkness of the sea, and driving against each other the great masses of the clouds like armies hurled together. The deafening roar of waters met the thunder of the skies as they rolled back peal on peal; and in the occasional glare the ship was seen, black and spectral, with sails rent away, and masts broken like willow boughs; flung from side to side as a lame bird is flung in cruel sport, now lifted on the crest of giant waves, now sunk from sight in the

chasm of the closing waters, reeling, rocking, driven at the mercy of the winds, alone in the trackless waste. The minute-gun was silenced now, or drowned in the tumult of the storm; but ever and anon from the tempest-tossed vessel there rose the shrill, piercing wail of perishing souls, the cry in which Strathmore had heard a voice as the voice of God, bidding him who had destroyed life save it.

The beach stretching beneath the wooded cliffs of White Ladies was almost deserted. There was no fishing village near for several miles along the coast, and there were no fisher-folk, no coast-guard men, no boats, save the pleasure-boats kept for the Abbey, pretty toys, shaped like Turkish caiques, that would have been beaten to pieces in the storm like painted butterflies. A few men had gathered on the shore—gamekeepers, lodgekeepers, woodsmen, labourers, cotters—looking helplessly on, full willing to succour those in peril, but incapable of lending any aid; they had a great coil of stout rope with them, but they gazed vacantly and sadly at it; they had no means to use it for any chance of rescue unless the storm lulled, and some dared swim out to sea. They fell back, and uncovered their heads as Strathmore's step was heard on the surf-splashed sand, and the lightning shone upon his face; he did not seem to see them, but stood looking outward to the ocean where the ship was reeling through the trough of the waves. In the uproar of the night, in the fury of the storm, in the violence of the winds that swept the sea apart

in yawning gulfs, and piled it high in beetling barriers of foam, and flung it over the quivering vessel as though it were some living thing they strove to stifle and entomb, help from the hand of man seemed hopeless; nothing but a life-boat could have lived through such a sea.

He stood looking in silence outward, his head uncovered to the winds, his eyes meeting the electric glare unflinching, behind him the granite pine-crowned slope of the cliff, at his side the group of men, silent, too, and watching him with something of wonder, for they had never seen their lord take heed of the waste or cost of life upon the coast; with much of anxiety and hope, as the light flashed flickeringly about them, for they knew how bold a swimmer he was, and had heard through what storms he had brought his yacht in distant tropic seas in years gone by. Unseen by him, for she knew he would forbid her braving the risks of the night if he saw that she had followed him—stood Lucille. Her arms were close wound about a tall pine to lend her resistance against the gusts that swirled through the forests, and bent the old witch-elms like silver larches; her long hair was unloosed, and filled with sear brown leaves blown in it by the wind; her eyes were gazing on him through the blinding flashes, her face white to the lips, but in awe with which fear for herself had no share, awe that was filled with the pity, the terror, the sublimity, the grandeur of the storm. The ocean, in her imaginative creed, was the mighty servant of God, moved

by his voice and ruled by his will; eternal power spoke to her in the rushing of the storm, as eternal mercy smiled on her in the sunlight of the seas. She had no fear; and she stood with her arms wound about the knotted pine, and her hair floating backward from her brow, as in the pictures of old masters the young angel stands, serene and filled with an infinite compassion and love, while the earth is tempest-rocked beneath his feet.

On the beach Strathmore looked outward over the boiling waters, and alone far out to sea the lost ship laboured.

The heavens were riven by a sheet of flame, the vessel was distinct against the glare, so nigh, that from the shore the crowd swarming on the deck and clinging to the ropes were seen in the spectral light. Then one huge wave dashed over her and laid her down on her leeward side; there was a crash, a crushing splitting noise, that echoed to the land; darkness fell over the face of the waters; the moaning wail of perishing lives pierced above the tempest roar—the ship had struck.

When the blaze shone out again, the wreck lay with its hull out of water, stranded on a sunken rock, a black and shapeless mass, a bow-shot only from the shore; more than a third of its freight of human life had been swept off by the sea that had engulfed it, and the remnant left clung to the shattered timbers, their faces turned towards land, their shrill shrieks ringing through the night. Strathmore's eyes glanced

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of the night ; and his philosophic creed had held in its calm logic that death, as the universal law, reaps its sure average every year, and that the mode of its advent is of little import. Life was precious to him, for his power, his intellect, his ripened triumphs, his gathered honours, his influence over men and nations ; it was as wide waste to risk his existence for that of a ship's crew—common sailors, wailing women, useless children—as to risk a man's for that of a dog. It was not for them that he came to wrestle with the storm, to rescue them or perish ; it was for the memory of the dead ; it was for the wretched law of expiation, which he had set to himself with the iron sternness of Mosaic law ; it was for the remorse which in its dark hours forced him to any travail, to any sacrifice, to any ordeal, which could wash the blood-stain from his hand. Thus he had done great things unknown to men, things of a noble charity, wrought on one inexorable principle of atonement, in silence and unseen of the world, even as in monastic days the soul strove to cleanse and justify itself by pitiless penance in cloister and in battle, among the plague-stricken and the infidel, in the death-ranks of the Crusade, and the reeking pestilence of the Lazar-wards.

He knotted the cord close about his waist, and glanced once more across the boiling seas ; he was a skilled and daring swimmer, and held all danger in the sure measurement, yet the cool disdain, of a sagacious courage.

" For heaven's sake ! my lord, you won't try those

seas!" said the men, involuntarily crowding nearer, their deference to his rank, and their first awed wonder at his cool rapid movements, breaking down before the imminence of the peril that he was about to encounter, single-handed and unaided.

"Strathmore, for the love of God, what are you about!" shouted one of his guests, who, with Caryll and another, sprang down from the cliffs above, having left the drawing-rooms soon after him to visit the shore, not naming where they came lest they should alarm the women; the thickness of the pine-boughs and the wood parted their path from where Lucille stood, and they saw her no more than he did on the beach, as they plunged headlong through the blaze of the storm down the slippery precipitate path, strewn with broken branches and with loosened boulders.

"Nothing wonderful," he answered simply; "only what any of my yacht's crew would do in a second."

"But no man can live in those seas!"

"Oh, I don't know. I have swam the Bosphorus in rougher weather still."

Young Caryll laid his hand on his arm.

"Lord Cecil! let *me* go! I swim like a water-dog, and your life is too great to be flung away on a risk."

The youth's face was very pale, and his eyes shone with excitement; he was of a generous, impressible nature, and it touched him strangely to see one whom he had known but as a haughty ambitious

and caustic man of the world, ready to face death for (as he deemed) the mere sake of those who suffered, ready to peril life to succour perishing strangers.

“My life is required of me ; yours is not.”

The brief, calm words bore no meaning to the boy’s ear, save that they refused to yield up place to him, but his hand tightened still on Strathmore’s, and his voice, hurried and low, was drowned to any other ear than his in the din of the storm.

“Let me go first at least, sir ! *She* would never forgive me if I stood by to see you perish.”

Strathmore started, and Nello could not tell whether the quiver which passed over his face was one of pain or was but the shiver of the flickering flash. He put him aside with a brief command :

“I forbid you to peril your life !—and while you talk the wreck is sinking.”

Then, shaking himself free from the other men, he plunged without pause into the dark, seething breakers :—the wild, broken cry of a young voice rang out upon the night, as the waves closed over him, but in the crash of the tempest, and the tension of high-strung excitement, none heard, or none regarded it.

In the glare from the rent skies, those clinging to the wreck saw him fling himself down into the boiling chasm of the seas to save them, and gave him one ringing cheer that pierced above the thunder and drowned the dying, stifled shriek of those who were washed at that instant into the darkness yawning

round. He knew that death was nigh ; he knew that the keenest skill, the boldest daring, could do but little against that mad mass of loosened waters ; He knew that in a second's space the chance was, as a million to one, that he would be flung back upon the rugged granite of the rocks, torn, mangled, bleeding, lifeless, or be beaten down under the weight of the waves, never to rise again. Yet he gave himself to the fury of the seas without hesitation, and let their surging billows yawn for him and close above his head, while over the wide waste of ocean the great darkness again fell, and those who gazed, awe-stricken and with tight-drawn breath, knew not whether the issue would be life or death. The lightning shone out afresh, and he rose, flung to and fro upon the heaving foam, grappling hard with death and danger, and refusing to be conquered : then, from the broken, shapeless wreck a great cheer rose again, and rang over the seas, sublime as a *Te Deum*, grand as the *Io Triumphe* of the victor's *pæan* ;—it was the “*Morituri te Salutant!*” of the dying to him who died for them.

Thrice he was hurled backwards to the shore ; thrice, bruised, buffeted, borne down by the weight of the waters heavily as by an iron mace, he swam out again, striking the waves with steady, unceasing strokes. The salt foam was in his teeth, and in his eyes, the seas threw him hither and thither, and flung him down into their depths. They cast him, now, outward to the waste of the ocean, now, backward

towards the jagged beach rocks, where, once dashed upon the granite, he would lie a shapeless corpse ; now high upon the crested billows in the lurid glistening light, while the great bulk heaved and rocked beneath him ; now, down into the chasm of the yawning seas, while the breakers swept over his head, and in the darkness he heard the sullen roar sounding in his ear and beating in his brain, and felt the surging of the waves seeking whom they should devour.

Neither from wreck nor shore could his path be traced,—now and again when the lightning lit the skies they saw his arms stretched out upon the black expanse, where he wrestled with the winds that blew in his teeth and drove the waves upon him, and swayed him to and fro as the current sways a straw. Once through the shroud of darkness that covered the deep, on which the wail of the drowning lives alone was heard, the light lashed to him shone out for one fleet instant, to be lost again in the impenetrable gloom. When it sunk from sight they could not tell whether he yet lived amidst the fury of the seas, or whether he were dashed upon the sunken reefs to rise no more, until a rigid, sightless, broken corpse should float upward in the dawn of the morrow's sun.

A great awe fell on those who watched and waited for the issue of this contest of one human life with the tumult of ocean and storm ; their lips were white, their breath was held, their brows were wet with dew. They feared, they trembled, they suffered for him as he never did for himself ; for in the jaws of

the grave Strathmore was calm, and with danger the dauntless and defiant courage in his blood rose resolute. He beat his path through the salt blinding water, recovering again and again every yard from which the wind drove or the sea dashed him back. None wrestling through the tumult of the night, to reach what they loved best from the fast-sinking wreck, would have fought a more enduring conflict with the death which menaced him on every side, than he who, with no human love, no human pity for one of those for whom he gave himself, cast himself into the devouring seas, for sake of a sterner and a nobler duty, for sake of the atonement which should save life by the same arm which had once taken life, and wash out the stain of blood-guiltiness by the ransom of lost souls.

The night was holy, the storm was sanctified to him. With each time that he arose from the salt, fathomless abyss, he was nearer to the expiation for which he laboured. With every stroke by which he forced back the murderous waters, he was victor over the remorse which in its dark hours made him accursed in his own sight. With all the bruised, exhausted pain of that wild work, as the ocean flung him downward, and the winds hurled him against the rocks, and the salt surf dashed in his aching eyes, he felt but as in ancient days, those guilt-laden and athirst for freedom from the memory and the burden of their guilt, felt the points of the iron in their flesh, or the torturing baptism of fire, as an

atonement welcome and hallowed, a purification before God.

For in these hours the dark, grand, wild barbaric nature latent in him broke out and ruled ; and shattered down the creeds of the Statesman, the Courtier, and the World.

At last he neared the rock, beating his way through the uproar and the gloom, while above him the great waves were like the towering crest of an Alpine slope. For a moment the lightning died out, and in the thick darkness he lay, waiting till in its glare he should be able to reach the side of the stranded and shattered hull. The blaze flashed out afresh, illuminating sea and sky, the measureless waste, and the dark woodlands of the shore ; and—at the instant when the dying saw their deliverer, and in the stead of death hope came to them—the curled, reared waters rolled, and swept up with a hoarse roar, like a lion's when he is an hungered and baffled of his prey, and broke upon the wreck. When they again severed and left it free, the crowding lives had been swept with them, and garnered to the grave ; a remnant alone was left : he was too late. The elements themselves mocked and denied him his expiation !

Where he looked upward to the shapeless, sinking mass, the cry of the drowning, devoured ere he could reach them, rang on his ear ; and from his own lips a moan broke in the silence and solitude of the vast waste.

“ My God ! my hand is too accursed to *save* ! ”

As though in answer, from the riven clouds the soft radiance of the moon shone out for one brief space, bathing land and sea with its pale light after the lurid glare of the storm. A few were left upon the wreck — four or five women and children and youths ; these, in their mortal misery, turned their eyes upon their saviour, and with that mute and terrible prayer besought his succour. No wild shouts greeted him as he swam to the wreck, and made his footing on its slippery woodwork ; those who would so have welcomed him, had a second before been swept away to death ; yet, as he reached the sinking ship, one, yards distant, wrestling for life in the trough of the sea, saw him, and gave him a single ringing cheer, the *Moriturus te Saluto* of the dying to the victor ; — then the voice ceased which in the throes of death had been lifted to hail him who had come too late, and in the black whirling water the sailor sank, with that greeting on his lips to the stranger in whom courage found its comrade.

The moon was shrouded now in darkening clouds, that were driven swift as the hurricane across the skies ; but the almost ceaseless play of the lightning made it clear as day. He saw the white faces of dead men rise up about him, and the dark floating hair of women's corpses was blown over his hands as he swam towards the reef, through the seas, which were strewn with the flotsam and jetsam of the shattered ship, and mounted with steady grasp the shelving, slippery mass, which was all that was left of the stately

vessel that when the sun had gone down had been steering calmly before the wind, with white sails set, through a fair and balmy evening, over a laughing azure sea. When the few who were gathered together, trembling and praying, waiting for instant death, and scourged by the brutal stripes of the salt billows as they broke, saw him ascend and stand amidst them, giving his life for theirs, they fell upon their knees and lifted their blanched faces, and blessed him and prayed to him with tears of agony: their saviour looked to them not man, but deity.

And as they wept and clung about him, and worshipped him as their deliverer from death, he neither saw nor heard them; but in that moment when he stood upon the deck, with the tumult of the storm between him and the land which he might never reach again—between him and the life which was filled with wealth, and power, and honour, and the ripe fruitage of a great ambition—Strathmore remembered but one, the Dead who in the long-buried years had fallen by his hand: and from his lips a prayer broke, more bitter and more yearning than any which those who wept about his feet prayed for their deliverance from the grave:

“Oh God! Let *this* atone!”

He bade those trembling and quivering in the terror of the night be still and of good cheer, and with the aid of the youths—lads who had been passengers in the ship, and could not swim—he unwound the rope

from about his waist, and fastened it tightly to a ring-bolt; the other end had been held by those on shore, and, made taut, it stretched a narrow bridge through the pathless waters, a frail yet precious aid through the great abyss that yawned between the drowning, and the land where lay deliverance and safety. It was a hideous passage—through the curved walls of the giant waves, through the black salt chasm filled with the hollow roar of voracious billows, through drenching, merciless blows of solid waters, with but that one vibrating cord as plank between them and their destruction!

Yet the love of life is a master-passion, and makes the feeble strong, the coward daring, the weakness of womanhood cope with the force of giants. It was their sole chance: one by one, in the glare from the heavens or by the flickering lantern-light, he directed them to descend, and pass along the rope where it stretched through the foam and the gloom. There were wild disorder, delirious panic, the fever of hope conflicting with the horror of despair, the abject anguish of helpless women. But the same tranquillity and resolve which bore down the opposing factions of states and ministries made their might rule here; he who is calm and resolute in peril is a king among his fellows. One by one he made them descend, holding back the reckless, encouraging the fearful, warning, guiding, commanding each, bidding each be of strong heart and of sure courage through the perilous and dire passage. Seven lives were launched by him on

that frail bridge which he had perilled his own life to give them, where it hung vibrating above the boiling surf, and passing through the gorge of the waves. One alone was swept down into the abyss, and perished; six were rescued, and one by one he saw them reach the shore, and received by those waiting there, in the ruddy gleam of the beacon-fire hastily piled on the sands from the broken pine-boughs and the resinous firs. He had saved them. Six lives wrestled for with death, and brought from out the grave;—might not these expiate *one* taken?

Standing on the wreck, which he refused to leave while any were still unrescued, he looked across the sea as the wild shouts which welcomed those whom he had succoured, and saluted the grandeur of his act, rang loud through a pause in the uproar of the storm; and on his face a light shone which had never been there in the days of his youth, and in his eyes came a sublime serenity; the peace, the gratitude, the rest with God and man, of the soul which, after lengthened years of travail and remorse, is at the last released from the brand and burden of its crime, and purified by expiation.

The holiest hour of Strathmore's life was this in which he stood alone in the wide desert of the ocean.

## CHAPTER IV.

## LOST IN THE HOUR OF REDEMPTION.

Two yet remained, young boys but little out of infancy, for whose delicate hands and fragile limbs the passage by the rope was hopeless. Their mother had been swept from them when at the first crash upon the reef the vessel had parted amidships, and half her human freight had perished: the children, by the wild caprice of the seas, had been spared, and sat locked in each other's arms, the elder comforting the younger, strangely stilled and in the awe of a voiceless terror. Strathmore looked down on them, then stooped and touched the elder, a little fellow of some seven years, whose fair locks were drenched in the brine and surge.

“Leave your brother and trust yourself to me. I can only save you one at a time.”

The child gazed up at him with sad and dreaming eyes; the horror of the awful night had left him

passive, his eyes were tearless, and his face very white. He loosened his arms from the little four-year-old, and motioned Strathmore to take him instead. They were French children, for the ship was a Havre vessel bound for America.

“Take Victor first, not me; my mother loved him best.”

The plaintive heroic answer was drowned in the hurricane, but Strathmore heard it, and lifted up the younger, as the boy bade him.

“I will save you both. Have no fear. You are a brave child.”

He took the other in the grasp of his left arm, who was all but unconscious from cold, from terror, and from the blows of the heavy billows, and plunged down once more into the waters. As he quitted the wreck, he saw one whom he had not noted—a woman lying prostrate, insensible, perhaps dead. It was too late to go back; when he returned for the boy he could rescue her if she lived; and he gave himself once more to the madness of the ocean, this time with the dead weight of the young child hanging wearily upon him.

From the shore they saw him leave the deck thus laden, then they lost sight of him in the deep trough of the heaving seas; in the darkness they knew not whether his life had been laid down in ransom for those whom he had saved, or whether he wrestled with the seas again to be again their victor. The blackness of night brooded over land and water, while

the sullen roar of the thunder rolled through the air, and the equinoctial fury of the winds lashed the storm to its height—they knew not whether he lived or perished.

Then, where the gleam of the fire on the beach was cast red and lurid upon the breakers, as they rolled upward, crested with white hissing surf, they saw him rise, bearing the burden of another life.

Swift as thought, Lionel Caryll flung himself into the sea, and swam to meet him. Strathmore threw the young boy to him, and, without pause, turned and went backward to redeem the word he had given to the child left there by his own will to perish, that his brother might be saved. Once more back through that terrible travail of life with an impending death; once more through the passage of the trackless seas, through the darkness of the tumultuous night, through the massive waves, with the brine in his eyes and his teeth, with the bodies of the dead floating around him, with the winds hurling him hither and thither, and striking him blindly with great masses of curled water. Once more;—while now, his breath came in laboured gasps of pain, and every sinew throbbed with the unnatural strain, every muscle quivered, every bone ached;—while his throat was parched, his eyes starting, his temples aching; while he had to combat with a yet direr and more insidious foe than the ocean, in the exhaustion which was slowly gathering over all his limbs, and stealing out the life and power from his frame.

Yet strength of the will conquered weakness of the body ; he reached the rock afresh, and the wistful eyes of the boy, gazing into the night, saw his deliverer return faithful to his word, though it was but pledged to a lonely child. Strathmore ascended the stranded wreck, and paused to rest, and gather force to reach the shore in this last passage, whose peril was more imminent than all. A brief breathing-space sufficed to give him back some strength ; his muscles were of steel, his powers of endurance great, and his ascetic life had left his frame firm knit as in his earliest manhood. As he paused, and looked down to where in the darkness the waves were dashing the wood and iron of the devoured ship together, and whirling the dead bodies of the drowned men in wreathing phosphorescent light, he heard a sullen menace roll and groan through the shattered hull on which he rested—it was the sure and ominous sound which preceded the parting of the few broken timbers which still held together. They were no longer safe for a single second : one moment more and the sea would break away, destroying all life which should remain near the abyss which yawned for them. It was quite dark ; the uncertain glimmer of the lantern he had left upon the deck was cast about his feet, but it shed no light on the wide waste around, where the cry of the waves was like the cry of desert lions, and the bodies of the dead were washed against the reef, lit only here and there by the weird phosphor-glitter on the surf. There was no time for pause, for thought ; he stooped and

touched the woman lying at his feet; she was unconscious from terror or from a swoon, but he laid his hand to her lips, and felt them warm; in her bosom, and her heart was beating. She lived; he could not leave her there to certain death.

He bade the child mount on his shoulders, and cling close so as to leave his arms free and his limbs unshackled; the boy, quiet and intelligent beyond his years, comprehended and obeyed him; then Strathmore raised the woman's form, and grasping her firmly in his left hand, felt his way with his right along the rope down the side of the wreck, which every moment might yawn, and crash, and disappear, and so committed himself yet again to the fury of the seas, thus heavily laden with the burden of two lives. The thick darkness was around him; he could see neither the waste that stretched before, nor the vaulted skies which brooded above him. He sank as he first swam out from the side of the ship; the great waves washed over him, and he held himself as lost, with the child's hands clinging round him, and the weight of the woman hanging on his arm. The waters closed over his head and over the boy's fair curls, and he felt the salt billows surging in his ears and stifling his breath: he heard the rushing of the surge, he knew that he was sinking to his grave. Better, he thought, for him to perish so—better to die thus in the supreme martyrdom of a grand labour, in the great ransom of a holy expiation. His death might absolve his life; he might then yield up his

soul in peace with God and man ; having sinned much, yet much atoned ?

But death was not for him in that hour.

The long hair of the woman swept across his lips ; he shuddered and sickened at its touch, he knew not why, as he had never done at the sharp agony on the jagged rocks, or the blinding blows of the massed water. By his involuntary movement his foot touched the projecting timber of the sunken wreck ; instinctively he struck with all his force against the beam, so that the impetus given might send them upward to the surface ; he rose, and they breathed again, floating in the impenetrable darkness on the face of the ocean. Life was yet his and theirs whom he had saved, and he lay on the waters, parting them with the strength of his single arm, while afar off through the dense gloom gleamed the leaping flames of the beacon fire. His hand grasped the woman's form, which he bore up against the force of the hurled billows, and her hair swept again against his lips, and her breath was on his cheek, while she faintly awoke to consciousness from her trance, as they moved through the icy air. Thus they passed together through the darkness of the night, through the tumult of the storm, through the valley of the shadow of death.

Thus they passed together amidst the devouring waters, with the innocent face of the young child nigh them, and the cold limbs of the lost dead washed against them.

As the last ransom of his soul from guilt, as the last

watched the woman lying at his feet, and then to  
screams from terror or from a swoon. He held  
hand to her lips, and felt them wet with the clouds  
and her heart was beating. "I will not leave you another;  
not leave her there to certain death," he said over

He bade the child mount  
clinging close so as to leave his arm  
unshackled; the boy, quiet as  
years, comprehended and  
more raised the woman's  
firmly in his left hand.  
along the rope down  
every moment might  
and so committed his  
seas, thus heavily h  
The thick darkness  
neither the vast  
vaulted skies  
as he first saw  
great waves v  
lost, with th  
the weight  
waters clo  
curls, and  
and still  
surge.  
Bette  
thus  
the  
mig

nom guilt had  
own into each  
boiling, hissing,  
you their faces, as  
ued behold and re  
e liquid fires of the  
... and terrible appeal,  
... the yawning abyss,  
... the mist of many  
ter in the hour of  
... to my eyes, and my  
... you should perish  
... up to seize her as  
... waves surged and  
... were stood but  
... was unknown:

upon her unless he gave his life to save  
whom she had made a murderer !

orse temptation than any that ever had assailed  
life, assailed him now, in the hour of his atone-  
ment : had he still strength to rise above it ?

Afar off, on the hanging rock, under the monastic  
woodlands, with her arms wound about the great  
stem of the pine, her fair hair floating in the wind,  
her eyes gazing down into the raging seas, unblinded  
by the storm, and opened wide with straining, yearn-  
ing pain, stood Lucille : and her young face, white  
and pure, and filled with a sublime light, was as the  
face of an angel, and on her lips was one voiceless,  
unceasing prayer to God for him, in whom she saw  
but the deliverer from death, the saviour of the lost.  
Had he looked *there* he might still have conquered,  
still have endured ; and saved himself from the fresh  
guilt which uprose and curled about him from out the  
slimy bitter waters like some loathsome shape from  
the depths of the sea. But the ringed lightning circled  
him, eddying round in its ghastly glare, a whirlpool  
of flame—fire burning on the icy gulf—and by its  
light he and the woman who had betrayed him gazed  
alone on one another as their faces rose above the  
seething mass.

They met again.

In his eyes there came the dark, merciless gleam  
of the passions which were not dead but sleeping,  
the ruthless thirst of the vengeance which no time

could satiate, no draught could slake: she was his temptress still. The noble serenity, the thankful rest of one who has laboured for absolution, and won his way to meet atonement, passed from his face —perhaps for ever. Where the lurid flame gleamed on it as he rose above the foam, it grew white and rigid with deadly menace.

And his hand unloosed its hold, and left her alone upon the fathomless seas.

“Die—as you condemned him to die!”

The words hissed to her through the tumult of the storm, and her eyes gazed up to his with a mute, appealing terror, yet with a hatred bitter and brutal as his own, where she was left to perish, the water reaching to her livid lips, her brow turned upward in the scathing light. Then, in the circle of the azure flame that played upon the chaos, Marion Vavasour sank, downward, downward, till the loose trail of her floating hair was beaten beneath the billows.

A moment, and he knew what he had done. An agony of horror fell upon him, he plunged down again into the depths—again and yet again,—he swept the waters with his arm; he searched for her in vain search; he grasped the gliding waves, the salt and slippery foam:—that was all!

Darkness fell over the ocean, and darkness as of the night covered his own soul, which for one hour of travail and of martyrdom had soared upward to God’s light, and had failed in the supreme instant of

victory, in the crowning ordeal of temptation. She had been his temptress again, and again he had fallen ; again through her he knew himself accursed ! And on his face a great misery gathered, for the weight of his guilt lay afresh upon his life, and the work of his expiation was tainted and shattered, and in vain ;—his ransom had been lost even as it was redeemed.

No human sight had looked upon that awful meeting on the waste of the ocean ; its history was hidden in the shroud of the storm, in the wildness of the hurricane, in the beating of the seas ; the darkness brooded over land and water, darkness impenetrable, filled with the rushings of the winds and the roar of the ice-chill breakers. When the light broke forth again from the riven skies, they saw him towering above the boiling waters, and holding the young child aloft ; erect, and with measured movement he came through the surf breaking breast high upon the shore, the glare upon his face, the cold surge parted by his arm. Then, as the shout of those who welcomed their deliverer vibrated through the midnight, Strathmore reached the land—and, without word, without sign, reeled and fell as one dead.

A cry, wailing through the night, rang on the silence as he fell.

There was a swift, noiseless sweep, as of a seabird's wing, past those who gathered round him ; in the beacon's light they saw what seemed to them a face,

rather of heaven than of earth. Lucille sank down beside him, where he lay on the wet beach.

“He is not dead? He will be saved?—he will be saved?”

Her voice, in its anguish of appeal, thrilled, above the tumult of the storm, above the hoarse roaring of the breakers; it pierced through the mists of the exhaustion which clouded and dulled his reason; a shudder ran through his frame where he lay stretched, felled in his spent strength, like a stately pine that the tempest had broken and laid low.

“Saved? No. *Lost!*”

His mind awoke to its guilt ere his senses revived to the world; but the low delirious words died muttered and unheard upon his lips. Life was dark and meaningless to him; he remembered nothing save that dim horror of unexpiated guilt; the noise of the rushing seas was in his brain, the throes of a great suffering throbbed and quivered through his strained limbs, an iron weight seemed to lie on him, crushing the breath from out his chest, as the lead and beams were piled on the condemned in ancient days; he was sinking down, down, into a fathomless abyss, while the amber hair of his temptress twisted and writhed and netted round him, and would not let him loose!

His eyes unclosed, and opened blindly and in pain to the wild fury of the night, to the whirling of the lightning blaze, till he saw the child-face above him, with its fair angel light. What had she to do there, in the night, in the storm, with the black seething

waters, with the giddy flame? In a faint, unconscious gesture, he stretched out his arms:

“Lucille!”

Their eyes met;—and with a low, delirious laugh of joy she sank senseless down on the dank sands, her head bowed unconsciously on his breast, her bright hair trailing in the surge, the virginal flowers that crowned it tangled with black beach-weeds.

And in that moment, as he met her eyes in the dizzy glare that swept over earth and sky and ocean, a light more terrible than the death-fire that played upon the sea flashed through the blind mists before his brain.

He knew that Lucille loved him.

## CHAPTER V.

### “AND RETRIBUTION AROSE.”

THE dawn broke, the pine-boughs were bathed in the light, the snowy surf was tossed upon the beach, the waves swept up with stately measure, and broke in melodious murmur on the shore, and the curlews flew through the fresh air. Earth, and sky, and ocean kept no record of their work, and over the sunken reef where the ship had found her grave, the wild blue waters, rearing in the sun-gleam, broke in joyous idle mirth, crested with snow-white foam.

Beneath the waves, far down in the salt depths, were floating lifeless limbs and trailing hair, tangled with the noxious weeds and briny grasses of the sea-bed; on the shore dead forms were stretched and dead faces were turned upward to the light, presently to be lain, nameless and unmourned in the shadow of the old monastic church, in the shelter of the still Druidic woods; and—as the sun

rose, and shed its warmth upon the waters—one life trembled between earth and eternity. It was that of Lucille.

Through the horror of the night, through the peril of the storm, an unnatural strength had upheld her while his life was ventured ; when he was saved, the tension broke like a bow over-strained. The nature which had found its power in love, and had kept its vigil in the air laden with death, was like the sacred light which burns in a porcelain lamp ; the brighter, the fuller, the purer the light from within, the fraailer the human-wrought porcelain which imprisons it, the surer to break and be shattered to dust, that that light may escape heavenward, to be lost amidst its own likeness, which it has not found on earth.

With her cheeks deeply flushed, with her hair still wet by the heavy sea-spray, with her eyes closed in a stupor that was never sleep, or opened wide in vague wild fear, she lay unconscious of all which passed around her. She deemed herself still on the sea-shore, clinging to the fast-rooted pine, and beholding the war of life with death, waged in the dark seething waste below. Her low, swift voice, full of the softest music, was never silent ; incessantly and incoherently, with a sad, sweet, wild pathos, it spoke—now, of the black mountainous waters, that were burying him beneath them ; now, of the terrace-roses which he had told her were the flowers of sin, the flowers of revel—why had he said that ?—what was it that he meant ?—now, of the solitary, nameless grave lying

under the ivy coils and woodland grasses by the old monastic church, which she had seen in the morning light ; why was it Lucille's grave ?—was *she* to lie there when she died ?—and now—ever and again—of the wild storm-night, of the dying cries ringing above the tumult of wind and water, of the dead floating in the white lightning glare of the seas which stood betwixt him and her, of the fathomless ocean-depths where he had sunk for ever, of the death whence he would never return.

It was strangely piteous that delirium which spoke of him unvaryingly as dead, and betrayed in its unconsciousness a love which was the core of her life.

Pacing the terrace beneath her windows, which stood open, Strathmore heard it ; and had his foes beheld him in that hour, they would have known, then, where to strike, and reach the life which, in all else, was chill and invulnerable as the cold polished steel.

Those who did see him when the day came, thought that the haggard, broken look which his face wore was the weariness of shattered strength ; that the dark and hollow circles beneath his eyes, the air of spent force and worn-out pain, which had displaced the repose of his face and the proud, negligent dignity of his bearing, were but the result of the past night, were but the physical prostration attendant on his physical injuries. They did not know them *as* they were ; they did not know that bodily suffering, and the exhaustion of powers overstrained, were un-

felt by him. What made him sick unto death was the dark knowledge of the guilt shrouded in the blackness of night, buried in the sepulchre of the seas ; what bruised and broke the haughty egotism of his strength, was the impotent, baffled sense of despair, before the expiation which was undone before his sight, and beyond the power of his hand to stay.

He had striven to a great atonement, and he had given his life to its travail ; and as he reached it, it had perished from his grasp, and left the guiltless to suffer for his sin !

He knew that Lucille loved him.

Standing there, where he had made his way into the cool fresh air, he heard in every accent of the voice, which thrilling with pain and rising in plaintive appeal echoed to him through the opened casements above, the love which he had never dreamed or feared until that hour when his eyes had met hers, and he had known it as no words could ever have told it to him. And his first sense then had been one of fierce, sweet, sudden joy. No other could steal her from him ! The next, remembrance returned, and a revolted self-accusing agony swept away all touch, all chance, all thought of that forbidden gladness which it only needed memory to destroy for ever.

He knew himself a murderer ; his hand could not seek hers with a husband's touch, knowing that on it lay the stain of blood-guiltiness ; knowing himself for what he was, he could not take a soulless life to lie

within his bosom. Shrouded from her sight, between them arose the eternal barrier of his crime, severing for ever the guilty from the innocent. Though through long years of joy she were never to learn the secret of the heart on which she were bidden to rest her own, never to hear in the still watches of the night one unconscious word which should unfold her the covered crime which haunted sleep, the union would yet be unholy—a dark, forbidden sin against her sacred innocence.

For the blood-stain was fresh upon his hand ; and where he stood in the silent dawn, looking outward to the sea, he shuddered. In the light of the breaking day he saw but the black chasm of the yawning waters, and the livid face turned upward, and sinking slowly in the guilty night downward and downward till it was lost for ever.

He abhorred himself, as he thought of the atonement so hardly laboured for, so nearly won by the strength which had passed through its martyrdom, to be vanquished by its own passions at the last ere it had grasped the victor's crown. For although the one sin lay buried in the past, and the other had been shrouded for ever from all human sight and ken, in his conscience he was none the less branded as the destroyer of Life ; in his own knowledge divided none the less from all innocent and hallowed things, from all pure and holy youth.

And Lucille loved him !

He, who for the sake of the dead would have given

his life for hers, was powerless before the retribution which arose from out the office of his solitary expiation. She must lose all the beauty and the glory of her youth in the shame of a hopeless and an unaccepted love ; and he must never let loose one word of consolation, one caress of tenderness ! He was powerless ; she must suffer, and he must behold the life he had sworn to guard from all breath or consciousness of human grief and worldly evil, smitten and accursed through him !

He had never by the faintest thought foreseen this issue of the care, and the fidelity with which he had followed and fulfilled the trust bequeathed to him by Erroll ; he had never feared or dreamed that she could ever feel for him any emotion deeper than the filial and childlike tenderness she bore him as her guardian. Of the good that he had done, the fruit was evil ! And far back through the stretch of many and forgotten years the words of Redempta the Bohemian came to him :

"The past has been wrought by your own hand, but the future will escape you . . . . . The sin to the guilty has been avenged, but the sin to the innocent will never be washed away !"

The future escaped him. And a great despair was on him : he fought against fate, he strove as with God's vengeance for a slaughtered life !

From above, in the silence of the waking day, he heard ever the plaintive wail calling upon his

name with the delirious words of an unconscious love. He could not hear them and not seek her; he felt that he must silence them at all or any cost. Were she to die for him, to die through him!

He entered the house and approached her chamber; on the threshold his mother met him, but he motioned her aside.

“Let me see her! I stand in her father’s place.”

In the hour of extremity the world is forgotten; she let him pass, and he stood in the stillness of the early day, in the chamber filled with the ceaseless moan of the voice that called upon his name.

Where Lucille lay, the light from the sunlit east fell on her, deepening the golden hue of the hair, damp and clogged with the clinging sea-water, the fevered, scarlet flush upon the cheeks, the wistful, haunting pain in the dreamy eyes; and as the full light on the heather-bell, where it lifts its delicate head, on the bloom of the flower, or the hue of the sea-shell, shows their beauty, only also to show their fragility more, so in the brightness of morning he saw, as he had never seen before, how frail was the life on which the work of his expiation was garnered. All of atonement that could be made by him to the dead hung on this brief existence.

He stood in the shadow of the chamber and gazed on her; in that hour he loved her, purely, deeply,

willing to give his peace for hers, as he had never loved ;—the one sacred and unsullied thing in a life world-corroded and sin-stained.

Where she lay her face was turned towards him, her hair swept backward from her brow ; her eyes looked upward with a sad, wild pain, and she raised herself, with a piteous gesture of appeal, as the vague, unconscious words came swift and plaintive from her lips, murmuring the strange burden of a weird, mournful, Scandinavian legend, woven in her thoughts by the unbidden wanderings of fever :

"Roses my secret keep,  
While those around me sleep!"

What does that mean ? The roses may hear, but they cannot whisper again ? He would not have me gather them ; he called them the flowers of sin. Why, why ? Others must have sinned to him ; *he* never sinned. He is so great, so noble. He cares for me for my father's sake ; only for that ! If he loved me he would not have bidden me go to strangers ? He knew Lucille had no love but for him. Perhaps he was angered because I gathered the roses ?"

The words died away wearily, while in her gaze came a troubled, wondering look. And he on whose ear that innocent voice rang, stood, with an iron calm on his face and the darkness of guilt on his soul ; smitten by those words as by the voice of an accusing judge.

Then a wild terror leapt into her eyes ; she lifted herself, with her hands outstretched, and a wailing cry :

“ He is dead ! He is dead ! The seas have covered him ; he cannot rise ! Look, look !—it is so dark,—there is no light ; the waters are on him ; they have buried him ! Let me go, let me go—oh my God !—and die with him ! ”

Her voice rose in passionate anguish, her hands were stretched out to the empty air, her eyes were filled with the misery with which they had followed and sought him through the horrors of the storm ; she lived through all the torture of that awful night, in which she had seen his life ventured and given to the mercy of the storm.

He heard the piteous appeal of the love which in that hour he would have suffered a hundred deaths rather than have known, given to himself ; and he saw that if any could save her he could alone. He moved from the shadow where he stood, and drew near her bed. He took her hands within his own, and his voice was calm, with that tranquillity with which Strathmore could rein in and veil his deepest passions, his most bitter agony.

“ Lucille, look at me ; I am with you ! My life is safe, and what harm can touch you whilst *I* am near ? ”

His words pierced through the mists in which her brain was wandering ; he held her hands within his, and his eyes looked down with a serene and loving

light into her own, which met them with bewildered pain. And slowly and soothingly the calm fixed gaze magnetised hers, and tranquillised her like the stealing peace of the lotus-fumes, which give rest to the weary limbs, and lulling dreams. The love which had endangered now restored her life; she knew his voice, his touch, his gaze, as she had known no other's; the terror passed from her face, a smile, faint but sweet as the glad light of the dawn, shone on it; and, as her head drooped and sunk in exhaustion, her eyes looked upward to him with the love so unconsciously betrayed.

The sun rose higher over the laughing seas, the white mists of the hills rolled back before the brightness of the day; still she lay there, her head resting on his arm, her hand lying in his, her hair sweeping his breast, and while a touch could waken her he would not move. His strained sinews ached and throbbed, as those of men taken off the rack, his limbs were bruised and torn by the conflict of the waves, sickening pain and blindness were still on him from the unnatural tax his strength had borne. But he did not stir, nor seek to release himself from the constraint of the attitude in which he leant over and supported her, till her restless, wakeful, still half-delirious slumber had deepened in the hushed calm of the silent chamber into the surer sleep of safety, with which the fevered flush faded from her cheeks, her breathing grew low and tranquil, her face lost its look of pain, and the life of Lucille was spared.

Then he gently loosened his hands from hers, unwound the hair which had coiled about his arms, moved her from him without breaking her rest, and going out from her presence passed to the solitude of his own chamber.

Unseen, his mother followed him. He did not move, nor turn his eyes to her; he stood silent and motionless, while the dark, heavy folds of the portière swung behind her; he knew her words ere they were spoken in his ear.

“It is *you* whom Lucille loves!”

“I know it.”

“You *know* it, Strathmore?”

“I knew it last night.”

His mother’s hand tightened where its light tenacious hold lay on his shoulder, and her voice, haughty and mellow still in her declining years, sank lower yet:

“And you——”

He put her hand from him, and moved to the deeper shadow of the mullioned window. She was answered.

A shudder ran through her frame, and her lip quivered, her voice sank lower still, as in the awe of an unutterable horror.

“Oh, my God! It must never be?”

“No. It must never be.”

His voice was calm; but there was that in its tranquillity which appalled her with a great terror; she was his mother, and she loved him. It was not for *her* voice to lift itself and say, “Behold! the guilt

was yours, it is but just that its chastisement should overtake you, and be also yours! It is but meet and due!”

She was his mother, in his remorse she had succoured him, in his retribution she yearned to him.

“My son! my son!” she cried, wearily. “You suffer—”

“I!”

The word rang out in passionate loathing and condemnation of himself; Strathmore had in him the nature of those who, in the days of Basil and Chrysostom, in the austerity of remorse, gave up to pitiless torture their bodies for their sins.

“I! What matter how *I* suffer; it will be but just. It is she—she—the guiltless!”

His voice fell, the dark veins swelled upon his temples; he moved from her again, and sank down with his head bowed upon his arms. She had broken the deadly calm which in men of his blood and race she knew and dreaded most; but where she stood by him, she—the aged and imperial woman, who, in all her years, had known no fear—trembled, and was afraid, for she had never until this hour beheld the bonds of his passions loosened, or the cold pride of his strength beaten down.

“Heaven help her!” she said, brokenly. “She will suffer—she must suffer. But it could never be, Strathmore? It were too horrible! You—you—”

“A murderer! Say out the word.”

His voice rang loud and hoarse, with his hatred

of his own life, of his own soul ; and she did not know that the darkness, as of night, which was upon his face, was that of fresh guilt ; that in the morning light he saw but the whirl of the giddy waters, and the white face upturned in the phosphor glare, and the amber hair floating out on the black waste, and beaten down beneath the foam.

“ You have striven to atone—you have done all you could,” she murmured. “ Effort is man’s, Cecil ; but the result is with God.”

“ Atone ! Ay ! I have laboured to atone, but the end of the atonement is accursed. I can destroy—that is devil’s work !—but I cannot expiate. My peace, my life, my soul, I would give them all for expiation ! and I cannot reach it. Cain bore his brand for ever ; so do I.”

The words were wild and hollow in their pain, their bitter futile yearning ; the one cry wrung from the shattered strength of a great lost soul.

And his mother shuddered as she heard, and covered her face, trembling even as Eve before the guilt which wrecked the mighty sin-stained life which she had given, and which had once been nurtured guiltless in her bosom.

For a long space there was silence between them, and he seemed not to note nor remember her presence where he stood looking outward to the early day, with the darkness on his face, which had come there when his hand had unloosed and left the dying to her grave,

and the light of sacrifice offered, of redemption won, had died for ever from his eyes.

His mother lifted her head and looked at him, and in her haughty eyes, which had rarely known such weakness, blinding tears gathered—tears for the force and the weakness, the grandeur and the guilt, the sanctity of remorse and the brutality of hate, so strangely blent and woven in his nature, whose will had power to conquer all save the passions which wrought their own curse. She drew nearer to him, while her voice was dropped so low that its whisper scarcely stirred the air :

"Strathmore—one word—you will not seek to expiate the past by what would be but added sin? Love between you and his child could never, must never, be?"

"Love!"

He shuddered as he spoke, and the haggard weariness upon his face deepened, while his eyes were bloodshot and filled with pain. The word was horrible in his ear; the name of that mad, sweet, delirious sorcery, which he had known once, never to know again; which even now, in hours of memory, he longed for, as men yearn for their dead youth; which had been the well-spring of his crime, the poison on his lips, the tempter in his soul, the beautiful vile lie which had betrayed him and driven him to his crime.

"Love!—from *her*! My God! if she knew me as I am! . . . . She would abhor me—she would hold

my very touch damnation. Wed her to her father's destroyer! Ay! it would be but added sin. *My* life cannot—and yet—who would have cherished her as I . . . ?”

The last words his mother did not hear, they were stifled almost ere they were spoken; and with a gesture he signed to her to leave him, and let him be. His nature was too kindred with her own, she knew too well the intolerant and silent souls of the men of her race and blood, to disobey his will, or rob him of the sole solace which is left to suffering—solitude. She stooped her proud head, and her lips rested on his brow, and trembled there in the tenderness which in his childhood and his youth she had never given him, and which throughout her life had been very rare in the high-souled imperious woman.

“ My son! God comfort you; I cannot !”

Then with that broken, murmured prayer, his mother left him; and Strathmore was alone. Alone to see ever before his eyes the white upturned face, met, after the lengthened stretch of many years, in the darkness and tumult of the night, his temptress and destroyer still! Alone to know the labour of his expiation stricken from his hands, the atonement he would have yielded up all sacrifice to attain, broken from out his grasp; the life he would have given his own to save, wrecked and condemned through him!

## CHAPTER VI.

## THE CHOICE THAT WAS LEFT.

BEFORE long, sleep, unbroken and restful, became the sure saviour of youth. Lucille was left fragile, fevered, with a certain startled fear in the dreamy depths of her eyes, a certain weariness in their drooped lids, but restored from the exhaustion and the pain which turn by turn had succeeded to the exposure of the night which she had braved.

The days passed slowly by, heavy, gloomy, early autumn days, with white mists on the yellow woodlands, and stormy sunsets in the dark western skies above the sea. The guests had all left, and the hours wore lingeringly away at White Ladies, while the spent strength and physical injuries, consequent on his recent peril, with whose story the country rang, gave sufficient reason for Strathmore's brief retirement and rest there.

“‘Heroism,’ ‘Sacrifice,’ ‘Nobility!’ God help me!

If they knew me as I am!" he muttered, where he stood in his private library, his eyes falling on the newspaper which lay open before him, where were painted in vivid detail the terrors of the shipwreck, in which alone and unaided one who was of value to the nation, had given himself to the madness of the waters and rescued six lives at peril of his own. . The act was grand and simple, and thrilled through to the heart of the people. They gave him but that which was his due; yet Strathmore turned from it abhorring himself; for this man judged himself more rigidly and cruelly than others would have judged him, and in that innate truth which remained to him through so much that was evil, recoiled from homage which worshipped that in him, which *he* held solely as atonement for his crime, and atonement wrecked and forfeited at the last beneath temptation.

"They kneel to a false god!" he said, bitterly, as he flung the paper from him; yet, perchance, he might be judged more mercifully than he judged himself, and the travail of self-sacrifice was not wholly worthless, though imperfect and guilt-stained at its close?

He rose, and walked up and down the chamber; he had an office to perform, and he feared the durance of his strength, for—he loved her. Not with that sweet, wild passion which had broken asunder all laws of duty and man, and been world, conscience, eternity, to itself—that comes but once in a lifetime—but more holily, more tenderly; and with

the intensity which those natures alone know, which are, like his, cold to all the world save one. And—God help him!—he longed to be enabled to believe his love hopeless and unreturned, with more agonised passion than ever a man prayed to have his love echoed in the heart he sought. Loneliness, pain, misery; ay, even the fate which should bid him give her with his own hand to her husband's embrace, he knew he would have strength to bear in silence, without self-betrayal; these, in all their suffering, would have been mercy to that love which would curse her through himself, while on his soul lay the memory which forbade him to shelter, and shield, and mingle with his own the young life which was guiltless!

For one long hour his steps unceasingly paced the room in solitude, then they turned towards hers. It was the first day that she had risen—the first hour that they had met—and he feared that ordeal as he had never feared the death with which he had stood face to face.

Her couch stood near one of the windows, and she lay resting her head on her hand, and looking outward to where the deer swept beneath the golden foliage; there was a fitful hectic on her cheek, a weary drooping of the eyelids, a certain look of pain and fever on her which smote him with sharp agony. *His* was that touch which he had bidden be accursed, by which her childhood and her peace had for ever been scared from their rest! Yet he must live as

though blind to it, speak as though he had no knowledge of, no tenderness for it, as though he were steeled and dead to the innocent fondness of the sole living thing for which he cared !

Lucille knew nothing of the delirious words by which she had betrayed herself. She had been vaguely conscious of his hands holding hers, of his eyes gazing on her, till the sense of his presence soothed her pain and fear, and lulled her into happy rest. She had been sensible of no more; and it was with no fuller consciousness of her own heart than that which instinctively awoke with the first touch of love in a lofty, delicate, and but too sensitive nature, that she saw him now. It could have no alarm, it could have little strangeness for her, this affection which was still that of her childhood, only deepened and taught to know that no other could ever reign beside it; to love Strathmore seemed as much the religion of her life as to love God. Her head turned swiftly as he entered, a glorious light beamed upon her face. With a low cry that thrilled his heart with anguish, she rose and sprang towards him, all forgotten save that peril from which he had returned to her, the heroism with which he had offered up his life for others through the hideous dangers of the storm.

They were alone; Strathmore stood silent, motionless, his face white, the veins standing out darkly upon his temples; *he* could suffer, he had passed through enough to be well used to that, but the trial that

awaited him was one far deadlier, it was to see *her* endure the fruits of his own guilt!—to know that with one whisper, one gesture that should bid her come to his heart and rest there, he could make her happy, yet to have that single word, that single sign, forbade him, and made horrible even in his own sight by the foul crime of his own past!

Power, riches, station, fame, the world's homage, and the dignities of men, he would have given them all to have stood *guiltless* before that one unsullied life.

With that glory on her face which pierced him to the quick, she drew his hands in hers, and laid her soft lips on them in reverent worship, and looked up in his face with broken words of love and honour, and tears beyond all eloquence, beyond all gladness; he was a thousand times more beloved and reverenced, come from the conflict where storm and death had been braved, with martyr sacrifice, for the pure sake, as she believed, of one grand, simple, human duty. And he stood beside her, chained back by the bonds of crime from all communion with the only thing he loved, while on his hand her sinless lips gave their kiss of sweet religious veneration, as to the hand which had *saved* the sanctity of life!

All utterance of her affection had been so natural with her to him from her childhood, that her heart could not wholly awake to the knowledge that this was that love which others begged from her; a desert child whom no breath of the world had ever touched,

and to whom no lips of man had ever whispered, could not have been more divinely unconscious of all profanities of passion than Lucille. Yet—at the look that was in his eyes as they met hers then—the words of homage paused on her lips, a light shyer, sweeter, than had been ever there, came upon all her face, with a flush sudden, and warm, and fitful, bright as the blush of the wild rose; she loosed his hands, and her head sank. It was so lovely that tremulous, half-conscious dawn of love! One who should have had no love for her in answer, looking on her then, would have known but one instinct and one response, to raise her in his arms, to gather her to his heart, and bid her rest there; to soothe with fond caress the loveliness startled into new beauty with the new pulse that stirred it. And *he*—who would have given his life for hers—stood beside her, silent, responseless, forbidden from her by every law of conscience.

Silence fell between them.

In that brief hour Strathmore suffered deadlier chastisement than pursues guilt in the scaffold and the grave; he suffered as those suffer who behold what they love and cherish slain through them. Yet still—that moment of silence given him—he addressed her with his accustomed gentleness; he rebuked her tenderly for the peril she had braved for his sake; he let her note no change in him. Only—his voice unconsciously grew cold in the strain which kept it calm, and he never sought or gave that familiar

caress which at meeting or at parting Lucille had used to receive from him, as she would have received her father's kiss.

That was for ever ended: the peaceful guardianship of the life bequeathed to him could never again be as it had been; her love seemed to sunder her farther from him than her loss to another could have ever done; his very hand was not fitting to touch hers now, stained with the fresh guilt of an added crime.

He moved suddenly from her side. He had a duty, bound by honour, to perform to an absent man, and Strathmore had no thought to be false to that—not even to spare her. He had a trained strength to endure, and his code of truth was lofty and severe. His face was somewhat turned from her, but his words were calm as he spoke:

“Lucille—you read the letter I left with you some days since?”

“Yes!”

Her voice was very low; a heavy misery began to weigh upon her young fair life, still vague, still nameless, the same which in delirium had found its plaintive shape in the words; “he does not love me, or he would not bid me go to others!”

His eyes were still turned from her; his voice was still tranquil and sustained. Such honour to the one absent, who had trusted him as he could still keep, he kept most faithfully.

“Lucille, I owe it to you and to him, both, that you should know I wrote no word there that was

more than barren justice to Valdor and to—to the love he bears you. In a few days I shall be in Paris for political matters: he will come to me for his reply. He believed that your heart was his—I believed so also—”

“ *You!*”

The one word stayed those upon his lips; the accent quivered to his soul in its wondering, piteous reproach. He could not plead another’s cause whilst he knew that every fibre of her life clung to himself; he could not bid her go wed where she had no love, and live in the abhorred pollution of a joyless union.

He was silent many moments; when he spoke, his voice was hoarse and forced:

“ It was not so ? ”

Her eyes looked upward with the gaze that had been in them when they had met his own in the light of the storm, then her head drooped upon her hands, while a flush of pain and of shame stole to her face.

“ Oh no, no !—never ! ”

He heard the words, barely above her breath though they were, and he knew what was uttered in them; that loyalty to himself born of gratitude, of reverence, of every hallowed and endearing memory, which closed her heart to all others. He had no need to question now what had parted them, when, in that which was her love for him, he had believed he saw her love for the one who wooed her. He knew but too well.

“ It was I who misled him, then,” he said, slowly, letting no sign appear of the effort his words cost,

save that which made them sound cold in all their gentleness. "I told him but what I honestly believed, God knows, and to you I have done him no more than honourable justice. He loves you well—it might be better if—"

The phrase died unfinished; his lips could not end it; her face turned to him one moment with an unspoken reproach more plaintive than all words, and her eyes mutely questioned him why was the fostering tenderness of his guardianship abandoned and forgot, that he should send her to another's home and bid her be an exile to another's love? Before that look his forced tranquillity, his strained composure, broke down. Master of his own suffering still, for sake of her, the misery of his life, which saw his solitary power of expiation shattered from his hands, broke out in one involuntary utterance as he bent to her:

"Oh, Lucille—Lucille! why is your childhood over! I could guard you *then!*—"

He had said, without words, that they could never be again as they had been, and all the loneliness of abandonment weighed on her with the loss of that guardianship which had never let her know one touch of pain, one wish ungiven, or one desire un forestalled. She felt as he felt, though she knew not why, as he knew, that the bond which had bound them was severed, and could not be replaced by any other. Of a nearer tie to him she had never thought; her love was too pure, too high, too wholly born in an

ethereal and reverent nature, to take grosser form and definite shape; she only knew she had no love for any save for him, and that the tenderness which he had lavished on her was for ever chilled and lost, and that he had bade her trust herself to other care and go to other hearts. He was the world to her—and henceforth she was as nothing to him.

He saw the peace he had sworn to save at any cost desolate and broken through him; he knew that he had but to lift her to his heart, and bid her lose her guardian's in her husband's love, to make his own for ever the life which had no law but his will, no joy but from his hand, and to see beneath his roof, within his home, before his sight by day, and hushed on his heart by night, the beauty of those young years, in which was garnered his sole atonement to the dead. And the work of his dead passions divorced them; the knowledge of his own sin bade him stand aloof, barred out from the life that suffered for him and suffered through him.

That his crime might be veiled from her, he must let her deem him insensible to the beautiful faith and love she bore him!—he must leave her alone in her desolation, powerless to solace or to save the life bound in him and wrecked for him!

He was strong to endure himself, but he had no strength to behold her suffer, as men have borne the torture without a moan, tearing their own sinews and rending their own limbs, but have been vanquished when they were chained to witness the same

ordeal wrenching the delicate form of the woman whom they adored.

For one moment more he knew he could command himself ; he stooped and laid his hand gently on her bowed head.

“ You are still weak, my child. Rest now ; I will see you later on.”

Then he left her. A little longer, and his control would have been wrenched down, his strength would have failed him ; she would have seen betrayed the darkness of a buried crime, the despair of a sleepless remorse, on the face of him whom she thought great and sinless, and held second only in her worship to that God in whom she believed not more holily and utterly than she believed in him.

Hours afterwards, as he crossed before the open door of the great library, he saw Lionel Caryll ; the young man leaned against the embrasure of one of the oriel casements, his forehead bowed upon his arm, his whole attitude full of a deep restrained dejection, his face very pale as the light streamed through the coloured panes upon his bright tawny hair.

On a sudden impulse—one of those vague, un-studied, and blind impulses which never before had had place in his temper or his life, an impulse of desperation rather than of thought or of belief in its own inspiration—Strathmore entered and approached him ; the youth started and looked up, the warm blood flushing his face.

“I absolve you from your promise. You may urge your love to-day—this hour—when you will.”

They were brief words, and uttered coldly, but to the young lover they spoke of heaven: yet even as the first startled gratitude flushed over his face in its wondering happiness, he was chilled and awed by the look upon Strathmore’s. He could not translate it, but in some vague sense he felt that the proud, silent man beside him suffered.

Strathmore stood where his own face was unseen by the youth.

“You are honest, loyal, and without guile. You love purely; her life will be safe with you. If you can win her of her own will, without pressure, do so. Keep her years happy, innocent, sheltered, you whom she loves as a brother, and you shall ask nothing from me that I will refuse. Go; and speak as your heart bids you.”

He turned abruptly away, with a sign silencing all reply; for one moment he heard the rush of breathless words with which the young man strove to thank him, and saw the flushed, tremulous ecstasy of joy which beamed on his face as it only beams upon the face of youth; with the next he had left the library, and the door of his own study had closed on his solitude.

Hours more might have gone by, or only minutes, he knew not which, when the door unclosed, and before him stood the boy, whom he had sent from

him a brief space before, in all the wild, sweet hope, the rich undoubting happiness of youth. Words were not needed to tell his story ; one glance, and Strathmore knew the issue of his errand, and the sudden rush of a hot, swift joy which swept through his veins felt to him like guilt. In all sincerity he would have given up his life to any torture to know that hers was safe where his own could never attaint it with regret, or shadow, or the dark curse of his own past.

He rose and laid his hand, with an unwonted gentleness of pity, on his nephew's :

“ Poor boy ! I only sent you to more pain ! ”

Lionel Caryll shrank from his touch, and his face was turned away, while his voice shook :

“ I only dealt *her* more ! She loves me as a brother ! I was mad to think it could be otherwise. I have but wounded, startled, grieved her—her for whom I would——”

His words died, his head sank, and in the desolation of his grief he forgot all pride, and strength, and shrinking shame of his young manhood, and, throwing himself down, sobbed like a child.

Strathmore stood and looked on him : he had no scorn for *those* tears—they were for her—but he had a weary envy of them ! and a smile of unutterable sadness came on his lips. What was this boy's first guiltless grief, beside that with which Life brims over for those who suffer and give to the world no sign ?

His hand fell once more on the young man's, and his voice, deep and softened, had a solemnity and a compassion in it which had never before been in its tone :

“ Lionel ! your grief is bitter to bear, yet be grateful that you *can* grieve—there is suffering which cannot ! Live so that you never know it ; keep your life as it is now, without remorse, and it will be peace beside *that* hell, however you suffer ! ”

The youth lifted his head, startled and awed ; then it sank again, and his stifled sobs were heard upon the stillness, vainly striven with for love of manhood, while Strathmore paced to and fro the chamber, with his head bowed, forgetful of Caryll's presence. Some moments passed ; then the young man arose slowly and wearily, and the change was piteous which had come upon his frank, bright, careless face ; all the sunlight was dashed from it, and a pale, drawn misery left there in its stead. He stood before Strathmore, and something proud and noble came on him as he spoke—vainly seeking to make his voice steady and calm :

“ Sir, I dreamed a fool's dream, and it has been broken by—God shield her ! —the gentlest heart that ever pitied pain. *I* can be nothing to Lucille ; less, now that I have lost my title of ‘brother,’ than I have ever been. *I* have no power to make her life, as you bade me, ‘happy, innocent, sheltered.’ That power lies in your hands, for—it is you whom she loves.”

Where they stood together he saw Strathmore shudder, and his cheek grow whiter; watching him keenly, the youth saw that it was not with wonder, but with a revulsion almost of terror that he heard him—the look which he had seen once before break down the pride and reserve of the man whom he feared, in the summer night at Silver-rest. And even in the blind pain of his sharp sorrow, Nello noted and marvelled at that look; whence could be its spring?

“You think this?—and why?”

The tone was haughty, but there was forced tranquillity in it; Strathmore ceased to stand before him, and passed again down the length of the library.

“I feared it long; I know it now,” the boy answered him. “She may not dream it herself—I cannot tell—but *I* read it in the very words with which she put back my love, in the very pain with which she shrank when I told her you had sent me, free to plead with her as I would for—for——”

The joy which could never be his!

His voice failed him; and Strathmore paced with swift and restless step the silent chamber, his head was sunk upon his breast, and in his heart was a bitter cry:

“*I* deal her pain! Oh, God, which sin must I choose!—the sin that spares her, or the sin that smites her?”

“Lord Cecil! have you so much tenderness for

her, and yet have no love?" cried the young man, brokenly, for Lionel Caryll's devotion was untouched with the selfishness of that passion which would slay what it cannot attain.

"No love!—I!"

The words were stifled—Caryll did not hear them, and pursued his generous, unselfish prayer:

"My lord! my lord! You must know that she loves you? Will you, who are so tender a guardian to her, close your heart to a fonder tie? She cannot love in vain! Men call you—you have seemed so to me—stern and heartless; but a cold nature had never been gentle to her as you are, a merciless one had never perilled life for suffering souls as you imperilled yours. Will you not have pity upon her? Can you give her in her youth to misery, to hopelessness, to the anguish which must be hers when she has learnt her own secret—for Lucille will never love *twice!*!"

"Boy, boy!—hush! You do not know what you tempt."

Strathmore had sunk into a chair, his head was bowed, his face covered by his hands.

The young man stood before him, awed, marvelling, deeply touched at the power his word had to break the icy calm and the haughty pride of the nature which for one moment he saw rent asunder.

"Forgive me," he faltered, while his unselfish devotion to Lucille conquered every thought of self,

and impelled him to plead for her as he would have pleaded for himself, preferring her peace at loss of his. “But—but—oh, Lord Cecil!—I spoke for *her*. It cannot be that you have no love for her? Can you refuse her a nearer place in your heart, in your home? *I* have learned the bitterness and the desolation of a hopeless love. I would give my life that *she* should never know them; they would be her death-blow!”

“Peace! for Heaven’s sake!”

His voice was hoarse with a terrible anguish, and barely above his breath; his head was still bowed, his face still covered. Each word which the boy spoke in his guileless and unselfish prayer quivered like a knife in his soul. Awe-stricken, and arrested with a terror to which he could have given no name, Lionel Caryll stood mute; the great tears slowly coursing down his cheeks, his bright and gracious youth sorely shattered and stricken; yet even in all the bitterness of his own despair, vaguely conscious that he was in the presence of some grief beside which his own was dwarfed. For a moment there was a dead silence; then *in* that moment, the proud man gathered back his strength, the statesman resumed the armour of ice which he wore with friend and foe. Strathmore rose; he dreaded lest he had betrayed his secret; but his face, though haggard and dark with the traces of a deadly conflict, was calm.

“There are reasons, in my past, why the thought

of marriage is painful, almost impossible," he said, slowly, and with forced effort. "And—and why should you urge this upon me? You have confessed you love her?"

The young man raised his heavy eyes:

"It is *because* I love her that I would know her peace secured, though its security left me only the more desolate."

The answer was proud and touching in its sad simplicity; it went to the heart of him who heard it; Strathmore leaned his hand heavily upon his shoulder.

"Lionel Caryll, you are nobler than *I* ever was!"

The youth's lips quivered, and he moved with a quick shudder; he had pleaded against every selfish dictate of passion for Lucille's sake, but he shrank from the touch of the hand she loved.

"My lord, you will forgive me if I leave your roof to-night. I could not stay now that—that——"

His voice failed him, and he turned his head with a quick gesture, that Strathmore might not see the tears which choked his utterance; but Strathmore's hand was not shaken from its hold, and his words were gentle—strangely gentle for him:

"As you will. But, ere you go, remember, for your tenderness to her, you shall still ask of me what you choose, and there shall be nothing that I will refuse. Think of me as your best friend; your future shall be my care."

The young man gave him one swift heart-broken look ; “the future !” to him it looked beggared for all time. Then his hand closed on the one held to him in a convulsive pressure, the dull echo of the closing door vibrated through the silence, and Strathmore was once more alone.

In solitude, beside which his nephew’s fresh guiltless grief, even in all its poignancy, was mercy. He must of his own hand deal to her the deadliest blow that could smite her life ; or he must seek her as a husband, hiding for ever the death-stain upon the heart on which she would be cherished !

The words that the youth had uttered, the lovely light which he had beheld on her face as he drew near—these were his tempters, his torturers. He could have bidden his own life suffer and be silent to his grave ;—but hers ! Too well he knew the truth, that never would that nature “love *twice* ;” that never for another would dawn and smile that beautiful gladness which, through him, must be changed to a curse. He knew it—he knew it. As he had destroyed her mother’s life in the morning of its youth, in the sweetness of its joy, so he must now destroy hers.

They stretched before him; that terrible, lonely loveless course of years through which she, the soft and fragile child steeped in sunlight and sheltered in tenderness, would be condemned to pass. Could he send her to them ? Could he leave her to believe

that she was barred from out his pity? Could he bid her be taught, that he, who had sheltered her with more than a father's care, was cold, and brutal, and dead to the holy love he had fostered? Yet—breathe in her ear the whispers of love, seek her lips with a bridal caress, gather her to a husband's heart in her soft dreaming sleep!—he could not, he who knew himself the slayer of more than one human life.

## CHAPTER VII.

## IN THE CABIN BY THE SEA.

THE gloom deepened in Strathmore's solitary chamber; the joyless autumn twilight stole over wood and moorland; the shadows grew more sombre: still he sat there, his head sunk, his strength broken. Of what avail were pride, will, power, iron force, and haughty dominance *here*? They could not shield the innocent from the curse that fell upon her from his crime; they could not compel the expiation which he had vowed the dead; they could not assoil his life and render it purified and free to seek the sinless.

Hours had passed; he had not raised his head, nor moved, when suddenly—he knew not what it was—there stole over him with a chill sickening shudder a sense as of a presence *felt* but unseen, which froze his blood and made him start, and lift his head and look outward to the twilight. And his eyes fastened

there with a blank, distended gaze ; a great horror came upon his face ;—in the sickly autumn mist, in the black shroud of the leaves without, he saw the features which he had seen, ghastly and livid in the phosphor glare, swept downwards to death beneath the waters.

Had the sea given up its dead ?

His veins were ice ; on his brow the dew gathered thick and cold ; terror like a hand of steel gripped his heart, stilling its beating life ; while up from the darkness, through the white cerecloths of mists, rose the form of his Temptress, until he saw her face with its grey blanched hue of haunting pain, and its amber hair driven by the autumn winds, and the eyes with their remorseless, cruel, thirsting hate, claiming him still *her own*—her own by right of their companion guilt ; her own by title of their evil past.

He gazed out into the falling night, his limbs powerless ; his voice paralysed, his lips cloven, while the spectral shape grew whiter and whiter, clearer and clearer, in the stormy air, and he saw her as he had done when his hand had unclosed and left her to perish, bidding her die the death that she had given.

They looked on one another thus, under the shadow of White Ladies ;—one moment, one fleeting second, that to both seemed lifelong—then the phantom faded, lost in the dull gloom, while the sough of

the leaves swept alone through the silence : and he trembled in every limb, and quivered as after a blow that had felled him to the earth. The ice grip loosened from his heart, the awe of an unearthly horror unfroze its hold ; and he thanked God aloud, as one released from doom, and led back to life by a gentle and compassionate hand.

For he knew that the sea had given up not the dead but the living ; and that he was freed from the guilt which had risen from the depths of the ocean, and tempted him. Not wholly freed, for crime lies in *intent*, and is not washed away, because a merciful fate baffles its committal and its consummation. Yet, freed in much ; and humbled in far more.

The face that he had seen in the yellow weirdly gloom was before him still ; still he felt as though it stole nigh, and breathed around him—the presence of the temptress, the traitress, the assassinatress. Fierce and deadly, evil hatred, burning passions, had leapt swift as flame into life, when in the tumult of the storm he had been face to face for the first time, since he had bidden her go reap the whirlwind she had sown, with the woman who had been his destroyer, and who had been driven out to misery and shame by the flail of his vengeance. But now, in the sudden release from crime, in the chastened awe of stricken pride, freed from a fresh sin through the wild and wayward mercy of the waves, these were not

on him. These for once were drowned and stilled. Truly had she said to him, in the years gone by, “*If I sinned, were you guiltless?*” And, strangely, as all things are strange in human life, with the sight of the woman who had betrayed him, there came upon him again the agony of that sweet, idolatrous love, the impotent regret for all that lay buried in his youth, never to be known again—never to have resurrection or successor. It was dead—dead for ever; and the great tears forced slowly from his eyes, and his head sunk lower and lower on his arms. If that love had been guiltless, if that beautiful lie had been worthy the worship, in what living warmth and light would have been bathed the life of the man whose god was Power, and whose tyrant was Remorse!

Through long hours he lay there with his head on his arms, as in the sleep of a profound exhaustion; it was the sleep of the soul, though not of the body, worn out with crime, with conflict, and lulled to rest through sheer weariness of misery. Then, after a while, he rose, and his steps ceaselessly paced his chamber, as though he trod down the memories that thronged around him, the passions that uncoiled from the past and claimed him for their own, the warring duties, the severed thoughts of the dead, and of the living, that tore him asunder as the wild horses tore the quivering limbs of the condemned. Across him for one moment glanced a thought that seemed

to scorch him like the physical touch of fire, making him shrink ere it was grasped. The fresh sin, hidden from the sight of men and buried in the secresy of the seas, was not upon him to bar him from the touch, the tenderness, the presence of the youth that was pure and without soil ;—for the dead years gone, had not atonement been striven for which might avail to wash out *that*, without the martyrdom and sacrifice of the life that was both innocent, and unconscious of that brutal past ?

Lucille loved him : what if—— He shuddered from the thought and flung it from him, as though in its very sweetness it were added crime ; cast it away with the same revulsion, almost horror, with which he had first heard its suggestion in the summer evening from his nephew. *He* wed her ! Now, when, for the first time, the thought of its possibility came over him, it looked tenfold more forbidden and unholy than it had ever done when he had refused to glance at it for an instant, when he had had no knowledge that her love was his, no imagination that it would ever become so. With newly committed crime upon his soul, he had known that never could their lives ever have bond between them ; now that he stood freed from this, he had seemed for one instant nearer to her, for one moment he had thought that he might guard in his own bosom that fairy youth, that sacred innocence, that beautiful dawn of purest love, fulfilling, till death should take him, the

trust which Erroll gave ; for one instant his heart had gone out with a pang of passionate yearning, a thirst of unutterable longing, to lock her close into his life, where none could ever assail her, and to make her his alone for ever, beyond the touch of evil or the accident of fate. But with its very thought, came the memory of all that severed them, making in the knowledge of his own sin divorce more wide than law could frame, divorce against which there was in his own conscience, no appeal.

*He wed her !*

He shuddered at the darkness and sin his life had known. Could he, more utterly condemned in his own sight than any felon that ever stained the earth, approach her with a husband's love ? he, who held from her in lifelong secresy the tragedy of her father's death, bid her lie on his heart in the soft stillness of the night, and give him the dearest name that men can claim from sinless lips like hers ? The more because now his own desire pleaded for it, his own peace sickened for it; his own love longed for it, did the mere hope, the mere thought strike him as with the horror of crime, as with the shock of blasphemy. *He become her lover, her husband !* It would be impious to the sanctity of the dead ; impious to the innocence of the living !

He went out into the still late night, alone, when no eyes were on him, and the earth lay hushed and darkened as a grave. His steps wore their track in

the damp grasses as he walked unceasingly on and on, to and fro, under the gloom of the woods, within the sound of the moaning seas. All the misery of his life seemed to fall short of this : she loved him : his own heart recognised it, other lips had said it ; she loved him ; and he had no choice left, save to give her up to a solitary and unpitied desolation, or—to do what his soul revolted, and shrank from, a thousand times the more because the answering love in him craved for it, and self-pity pleaded for it with a passionate pain that he stifled as some vile infamy towards the dead and her. Where question had arisen of sacrifice of himself to her, he had known no temptation, no hesitation, no struggle ; he would have given his life for her, and would have doomed himself without a thought of pity to an eternity of woe to have saved her a single pang. But here—sparing her, he spared himself ; or, thrusting back the temptation that coiled about him, and accepting the just chastisement of his past, he must sacrifice with him all her life, and through himself, destroy what he had sworn to cherish !

A young poet once wrote :

“ If sorrow could be won by gifts to barter prey for prey,  
There is an arm would wither, so thine revived might be,  
A lip which would be still and mute to make thy music free,  
An eye which would forget to wake to bid thy morning shine,  
A heart whose very strings would break, to take one pang of  
thine.”

Strathmore, no poet, and to whom the gentleness of self-sacrifice was by nature alien, felt not less than

this in all its absolute self-negation, in all its passionate tenderness and fidelity to the only one that he had ever purely loved, to the only trust bequeathed him by his friend. And now he could alone spare her, by binding with his own the life that every memory of the past, and every law of conscience forbade from him, and banned from his very touch! Which choice could he make?

To the man whose path even through guilt had been firm and incisive, as though cut with steel through wax, who had never hesitated, who had never doubted as to his own course, or to his own resolve, an agony of indecision was the worst torture life could hold. Whatever he had suffered, he had never before endured this; his will, however erring, had been resolute and prompt to act, as the will of a tyrant; and this helplessness of doubt, this conflict of opposing duties, this struggle in which he could see no light save from one path that he dared not follow, was greater anguish to a nature like Strathmore's, than any clear shape of action could ever have been, even though it had taken him to a martyrdom.

Do what he would, it seemed to him that he must each way sin to her and to her father; whether he left her and let her fair youth consume in the bitterness and shame of an unanswered love, or whether he crushed the past down out of sight and memory, and took her in his heart and in his home—his wife; whichever he chose he thought that guilt

must lie upon his choice. With the one he must break for ever his loyalty to the trust he held, and lose for ever his only expiation to the dead ; with the other he must woo her to a union that seemed to him an outrage against her innocence, a forbidden unholy treachery that would betray her in her unconsciousness into the arms of her father's destroyer. Do what he would darkness and crime seemed to rest on it ; and all he had done turned into evil. All gentler things, all nobler effort, in him had been vain ; and out of his fealty to the dead man's trust came the doom that wrecked it. His tenderness for her had been pure and unsullied, the holiest thing his heart had ever known ; yet even the fruit of that was evil. Unwitting what he did, he had taught her a love that he would have died rather than waken ! With every caress, every gentle word, every unremitting care, given her for her father's sake, he had in cruel unconsciousness sown the seeds of a misery he had never dreamed as possible. Was there none in the wide world for her to love but the criminal whom a brutal past divided from her ?

And yet—and yet—who would ever cherish as he would cherish her !

All through the autumn night, till the dawn broke greyly over the dusky seas, he walked alone with steps that wore a weary track through dank grasses and on heavy sands ; and the day broke and found him no nearer to his choice, no better able to meet and vanquish the fate that had suddenly risen up

from the ashes of his dead sin, and mocked his dreams of redemption by seizing the pure life he guarded, and flinging it out to misery with his own.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the little hamlet that nestled above the sea on the borders of the great forests of White Ladies, and in the dip of one of the wild western valleys, stood a shealing, scarce wind and water proof, with the blasts of the early autumn moaning through its time-browned thatch, and the pomp of the autumn foliage sheltering its rotten timbers in a wealth of reddening gold. Those who made their home there were very poor, a woman old and feeble and her grandson who was yet but a child; still in their poverty they would break half their last crust for one poorer still, and such as their roof was would share it.

When the sun had risen after the night-storm, and high upon the beach were washed black drift-wood and broken wealth, and nameless sightless corpses that the fish had spared, they had found one woman tossed by the mad mercy of the waves in safety on the beach, and living still by one faint scarce-felt pulse of life. They had raised her, and brought and lain her gently on the heap of hay that served them as a bed, and, though she was poorer yet than they, since the seas had only left her this flickering remnant of uncertain life, and robbed her of all else, they did their best for her, and served her as they could, with that most touching charity of all—the charity of want to wantlessness.

Here, on the pallet of dry grasses she lay ;—the woman who once had slept in the palaces of kings.

Broken, bruised, stricken, having lost almost all likeness of herself, delirious, though she kept even in fever the secrets of her past, with something still of lingering matchless beauty that *would* not perish ;—beauty even yet in the voice that murmured wild words, in the hair flung in wild disorder, heavy with brine and tangled with black weeds, in the hand which closed on the dry hay with unconscious pain, in the eyes which never could utterly lose their lustre. She was still living, she who would have thought death a thousand-fold gentler than life, yet who had shrunk from it when it was near, with the cowardice of a criminal, and the physical terror of womanhood. Living—in such last depths of woe, that she owed the cold water held to her lips, and the wretched bed on which her aching limbs were stretched, to the charity of the lowest and the poorest hirelings of the man who once had been her slave.

He had bidden her live to suffer—and retribution had driven and scourged her into obedience to the uttermost letter of that brutal Mosaic Law.

The woman and the boy who tended her, one in extreme age, the other a young child, did their best for her, but they feared her and shrunk from her, they could not have told why. About her there still remained something of inalienable grace, of patrician haughty majesty, and on her in vague yet awful shape, that they rather felt than saw, guilt had left

its seal, and shameful years their trail. Long ago, the cruelty and crime within her had flashed out even in her young soft dazzling beauty; now they reigned alone, and gave her a terror to the simple peasants who gathered round her. Yet they did their best; and when the night before, being unwatched, she had risen, and wandering in the mechanical action of delirium, had dragged her weak, bruised limbs through brake and woodland, and wide grassland and dense thickets, till she had crossed the park of White Ladies, and gazed vacantly through the windows of the Abbey in the dull mists of falling night, they had followed her and found her lying senseless and exhausted among the dank yellow ferns, and had brought her back in redoubled pity to such shelter as they could give.

There she lay now in the risen day, insensible still, and moaning wearily, with strange pathetic murmurs now and again upon her lips, and eyes wide open to the light with a blind gaze that looked out upon the earth where she had now no place, and on the sunlight which now to her could never be but mockery and pain. The broken rafters yawned above her, while through them poured the chilly autumn winds; the air was heavy with the lowering smoke of a low peat fire burning on the hearth; the pile of sear grasses and straw was beneath the form once beautiful as a dream of Phidias; squalor, misery, darkness, were around her, and in that wretched cabin by the sea lay the woman who once had bowed monarchs to

her smile, and swayed a sceptre wider than sovereign's own. Suffer as she would, her suffering could never yet be so great as her sin had been.

Without, the noon was at its height, and the glancing waters stretched serene and bright ; within, even the day could lend no fairness to the den where human lives lived in penury that made the kennelled hounds of White Ladies seem lapped in luxury. The old peasant rocked herself before the labouring smoke of the damp fire ; a broken pitcher of cold water stood beside the pallet where she had let a stranger lie ; the place was black, and close, and noisome.

Suddenly, and softly, the door opened, the freshness of the mellow autumn day flooded the cabin floor, on the threshold stood, like a child-angel that gleams out in all its golden glory from the dark backgrounds of old altar pictures, the bright youth of Lucille.

To those whom the wreck had flung homeless and beggared on the shores of White Ladies, she seemed like such a spirit, bringing balm, and healing, and hope, coming to their bereaved and desolate lives with her fair young face and her loving, exhaustless charity, which from her earliest years had known no happiness so great as to give succour to suffering, and had found compassion for the vilest, "driving away all things of sin and guilt" by its own divine unconsciousness of their shame and danger.

Lucille's life was love ;—for all who suffered with that suffering whose shadows she had never felt, for

all who sinned with that sin whose meaning she had never known. Earth was so beautiful to her, and the smile of God so near her, that her heart ached for those who dwelt in pain, and who denied his love. She longed to make them as herself ; she longed to lead them where she knelt.

Alone, leaving her attendants without, she came into the dark and wretched shealing. She had heard from the boy without, that a shipwrecked stranger lay there ill and delirious. Lucille had her father's nature ; with all her soft brightness and her child-like delicacy she had a high courage, and an unselfishness as rare as it was elevated. She never had known fear. And she came now into this pent hovel —came to serve and succour the outcast lying there. In the dusky smoke-thickened air, she stooped, as the old peasant rose to her in reverence and wonder, and shook into her lap a bright shower of silver ; wealth Strathmore lavished on her, and it ever went to those who were in want. She gave, too, with that generous grace which took all sting from any alms, and made those whom she relieved not her debtors, but her idolators ; she gave her charity as widely, and as unconsciously of merit in the gift, as a flower gives its fragrance. Then, while her words still lingered on the woman's ear like some gentle chime of music, she swept with hushed steps towards the dark corner where the strewn grasses were tossed down, and where, on that miserable bed, with sightless eyes and fevered limbs, and lips that murmured wearily

words without meaning, Marion Vavasour, homeless and nameless, lay.

They were together ;—the innocent and the guilty life ; and with the infinite compassion of her youth, Lucille looked down upon her father's murderer, lying there at her feet in darkness and wretchedness, where the rays of the sun did not enter, and the autumn winds made their dull moan about her. Thus they met at last.

“ Ah !—how she suffers !”

The soft words stole, wistful as a sigh, from her lips, as she gazed down on the bruised, shattered, destroyed beauty which yet *was* beauty, and survived the wreck of all else in this lost womanhood, this doomed and accursed life. She suffered !—the eyes burning but without light, the lips that moved with senseless words, the weary pain of limbs that could find no rest, and brain that could know no sleep,—in these she suffered with every breath she drew. And beyond these there was a darker, direr suffering still ; where the wild thoughts wandered, was over the course of an evil life ; where the blind memories went, was into depths of guilt. Sin is sweet in the noon of its power ; but it is terrible beyond all terror in the midnight shadow of the grave. And its reflection fell on Lucille with a vague dread ; in her young and carefully-guarded life she had never seen the look that she saw now on the face of the woman before her ;—that wreck of ruined beauty, that unconscious wild defiance, that lost and broken gran-

deur which gleamed still through all the darkness of evil and of shame. She had never seen it; it had awe and fear for her, all strange and nameless as it was, yet her first instinct was that of the infinite pity which could shrink from nothing that was human, and could be denied to nothing that was in misery.

She sank down, kneeling beside the wretched bed with all the grace of her own loveliness, all the gentleness of her own nature; and with a musing pain in her eyes gazed down at the woman to whom she had owed the deadliest wrong of all her life, before her life had known its loss. Her heart was heavy with its own first bitterness, with a weary aching sadness that hardly yet knew its own spring; life seemed unclosing about her in all its hidden mysteries, its solemnity of pain; and in the insensible anguish on which she looked, she seemed to see, as by some sudden revelation, how terrible this world could be, which to *her*, until so late, had been one sunny Eden of eternal summer. She touched, with lingering caress, the amber tresses that were tangled with the brown rough grasses of the bed; she laid her hand with cooling perfumes on the brow that burned like fire beneath it; she bent over her with pitying words, whose melody insensibly soothed and silenced the moaning wandering murmurs on the parched lips. Unconscious what she did, she brought her compassion, her tenderness, her angel ministration, to the assassinatress by whose lie her father perished. And there, in the deep shadow of the

leaning rotten roof, she knelt beside her ;—her youth, her innocence, her fair ethereal life, beside the bruised, stricken, guilt-steeped outcast, who owed a stoup of water to a beggar's alms.

The day had risen and become noon. Strathmore, who could find no rest, was up, after a few brief sleepless hours on his bed, walking still, scarce conscious where he went, alone in the wild forests and solitary shores of White Ladies. No nearer to his resolve, no closer to decision between the divided duties that had their conflict in him—the duty which bade him guard her life without a cloud, the duty which forbade him to make that life one with his. Choose which he would, he must err to the dead and to her ; which error would be the less ? That he himself loved, that he himself longed to have the sweetness of her young lips, the love-smile of her eyes, the keeping of her peace and joy, he let weigh nothing in the scale. A haughty egotism had once too entirely ruled him ; but now he would have crucified every thought of self with an unswerving martyrdom, and thrust his own remaining years into any depths of woe, if by so doing he could have saved or aided her.

He did not know how the hours had passed ; he did not remember how his absence would be noted, since men who have the triumph of eminence, can never have the luxury of solitude. He walked on and on, feeling a strange relief in that ceaseless movement, in that physical exhaustion.

Which must he choose ?—the betrayal of his trust in consigning her life to sorrow ; or the betrayal of her innocence in wedding her, with the past stifled and buried from her ?

Either seemed equally accursed to him.

Wandering without aim, almost without knowledge, he came to where the sea-side cabin stood, with the sound of the waves under the cliffs below, and the great woods locking it in their depths. The group about it fell back at his approach ; he looked at them with surprise, recognising those who specially attended her.

“ Why are you here ? ”

“ Mademoiselle Lucille is within, my lord.”

“ Within ?—*there* ? ”

He laid his hand upon the door and pushed it open. For a moment all was hazy and dim before him, coming from the full and mellow light into the darkened shed ; then the leaden clouds of smoke seemed to roll back, and beyond them he saw, kneeling there in the gloom, the bright child who was the fitting minister of a godlike compassion, beside the bed on which the homeless exile lay. A sickness of horror came upon him ; the darkness whirled before his sight ; dizzy, breathless, stunned, he leaned nearer, gazing on them in the blankness of a ghastly fascination ;—one glance, and he had known the face of his destroyer.

And he saw them together !—he saw Lucille beside

the woman who had tempted him to his crime, and had been, more yet than he, the assassin of her father!

Life seemed to have held no retribution for him until now. Remorse, remorse! where was its use? It was vain as to seek back the dead from their tomb, since his guilt could follow him thus!

He looked on them together, the life of cruelty and sin, beside the soulless youth, pure as the flowers that opened to the dawn; he met the senseless, blind gaze of the eyes in which his heaven once had shone; he saw Lucille, kneeling before that bed of shame, with a prayer upon her young lips—a prayer of *pity*! —and on her face the light of a beautiful mercy, of an exhaustless love. In all the width of the crowded world must *these* meet! One moment, while his gaze fastened there, in what appeared to him an eternity of dim, unutterable horror; in which he saw them in that dark and wretched place across the rolling smoke, that seemed like the pestilential breath of his dead years rising round the innocence of Lucille to destroy her for ever;—one moment, in which a hideous unreality possessed him, and the burning eyes of the woman he had loved gazed without sight or sense in his;—then, with an unconscious gesture, an unconscious cry, like that in which he had once before answered her love and betrayed his own, he stretched out his arms.

“Lucille! Lucille!”

She looked up, rose, and sprang towards him with the fond instinct of her childhood, stronger in that moment of surprise than the estranged pain which was between them. Not knowing what he did, or who beheld him, he pressed her to his breast with unconscious passion, and drew her into his arms, away from that bed of misery, away from the senseless gaze of those haunting eyes.

“My God! what brought you here?—what madness sent you to this accursed place? You—you——”

There was a jarring violence in his voice, a passionate force in the embrace which closed on her, that he was insensible of, that she felt with startled, wistful awe, half gladness and half fear; her heart shrank from it, and yet knew that this was greater love than the gentleness which she had always known. The doubting, wondering look of her lifted eyes, the instinctive movement with which she drew herself from his arms, wakened him to the knowledge of what he did, of what he said; to the memory of how his own words might betray him, of how, before all, above all, *she* must be spared. In the presence of Marion Vavasour his hand had no right even to touch her own! In that moment he could have flung himself down at her feet, and told her all, bidding her hate him, revile him, lay what vengeance and what misery she would on him, so that only there were no secret between them,—so that only she forgave him as her father had forgiven!

He loosed her from him, and his voice was broken and indistinct, while he dared not look upon her face, he dared not meet her eyes, though still he forced her out farther from that place, and nearer towards the pure day.

“I startled you—forgive me ! This is no place for you ; there is danger here, and evil,” he murmured, incoherently. “Come—come ! Do you hear me ? Come ! You are too young for these dens of vileness !”

“They are only very poor ?” she pleaded, softly, while her own words were tremulous, and her heart seemed stirred with the passion that for one moment had vibrated with such force in his. “The people know me well—and—and she suffers so much ; let me stay with her a little while ?”

He shivered under the gentle words which pleaded with such pity for the outcast lying there. He took her hands one moment and pressed them against his heart, that beat beneath them with loud laboured throbs.

“Oh, my love, my child ! your life is too fair to be near mine—or hers—or any that sin has touched ! You are pure as the angels ; and *we*— ! Come, for the mercy of Heaven, come ! *I bid you !*”

A deep flush came on her face, her eyes looked at him wistfully, her lips trembled slightly ; vaguely and sweetly, yet with something of pain and fear, she felt that the love which spoke now in his words was another than that which had sheltered her childhood. His will was her law, and with one pitying,

lingering, backward glance to where the nameless stranger lay, she went with him, and was borne out by him into the tranquil noon, into the silence of the solitary woods. He knew nothing that he did; he had one instinct only, to force her from that presence as from some pestilential place, to carry her far away down to the fresh waters, into the depths of the fresh forests, anywhere—anywhere—from the search of that burning gaze, from the breath of that destroying life!

She did not move, she did not speak; once she looked upward at him with dark dreaming eyes; that was all; a strange solemnity, half of awe, half of terror, yet sweet beyond all words, seemed to thrill through all her life. She heard the quick, loud beatings of his heart; she felt herself borne on and on by his hand, as if by invisible wings, in silence through the bright sun-lightened forest aisles; alone with him, while the stillness of the great woods were round them, and beyond the glorious freedom of the sea lay flashing in the light.

His arms closed on her as though in their strength to hold her back from the vileness of the past that rose to smite her, his head drooped over her while hot tears fell upon the brightness of her brow, his eyes looked down with a yearning anguish into hers. All his life longed for her; and yet—love between *them*! Love while her father's splendour of manhood had fallen by his hand, and there, beyond the reddened

wood, still lived the temptress and companion of his sin ! He shuddered at it, he shrank from it as from fresh crime ; yet his arms drew her nearer to him ; his breath was on her cheek ; the moment's instinct was stronger than himself, it shattered every other thought aside, and drove him on unconscious what he did, while all his heart went out to her in passionate pain :

“ Oh, Lucille ! my child ! my treasure ! my angel ! my lips are not fit for yours ; my life is not meet for yours, and yet——Oh, God !—I love you ! ”

Her face grew white, he felt her tremble in his hold, she quivered like a delicate animal under a blow; and her eyes glanced up to him with a swift appealing glance, with all the deep and dreamy wonder of a heart freshly startled to its own knowledge. He pressed her closer yet in his embrace :

“ My love you have ever had ; but *another* love, Lucille ;—the love of a husband for the life that is dearest to him on earth—— ”

His voice, broken into indistinctness, spoke more of tenderness than words can ever hold, and as she heard it, over her brow came a deep changing flush, a soft tremulous light, her lips parted with a quick sigh ; a glory touched her life, in which the golden world of sea and sunlight reeled before her sight ; her eyes sought his in one fleeting look, and his lips met her own in the kiss which they had never given,

often as they had rested there ;—the kiss of love. The choice was made ;—her life was his for ever.

And there, at her feet, unnoted beneath the tangled grasses and the ivy-coils of the sea-shore, lay one forgotten grave, with the leaves covering the solitary word of record—

“ *Lucille.*”

Even while the gladness of morning glanced on the serenity of the waters, and on his own lips was the soft warmth of her first caress, a sudden icy chillness swept through all his veins, and he drew her with a passionate gesture closer to his bosom, farther into the forest solitudes. Their first love-words had been uttered by her mother’s grave !

## CHAPTER VIII.

“ IST AUCH DIESSEIN IRRTHUM SO SCHONT MICH  
IHR KLEIGEREN GOTTER.”

WHEN the night had fallen with its grey gloom of twilight, a shadow came towards the threshold of the cabin by the sea.

The hut was forsaken ; the low peat fire burned dully on the hearth, casting a dusky, fitful gleam ; on the pallet in the darkened corner the nameless wanderer lay, in blindness, in stupor, in feverish, restless pain. There was not a dog to watch her sleep, or to grieve for her now ;—for her for whom once sovereigns had waited, by whom human love had once been gained and spent, and broken, idly and cruelly as a child wastes king-cups in a summer’s day.

The shadow crossed the threshold, and the bare mud floor, and came towards her bed in the sullen crimson light ; Strathmore stood and looked on her again, drawn there by a force he had no power to resist —the force that makes men their own accusers and

avengers. He was alone, and she lay stretched unconscious at his feet.

Once he had said that vengeance had a sweetness which none could ever steal; now he knew that it may bring in its fruition, a pang as deadly for him that strikes, as for the stricken.

His eyes dwelt on her one moment in a long shuddering gaze, this life that was his own crime, incarnate, and ever pursuing him.

Was *this* the loveliness which had seemed immortal in its deathless splendour? Past him there floated, as in a dream, all the dazzling hours of her youth and his. The woman *he* had loved was dead; dead long years ago in the grave where their youth lay. *This* was not she; no more than the yellow faded leaf that, scentless and withered, is trodden in the dust and drifted down the wind, is the rose that yesterday swung in the light of palace-gardens! No more—no less!

He stood and looked on her under the black leaning roof of the hovel, while the sullen blasts poured down through the broken thatch, and the dull flame threw a weird flickering flash over the bed of straw and rough sand grasses. Those who have seen what they have cherished lie still and peaceful in the calm of death, have known an anguish that is mercy beside what he knew now. For he had loved her; with a love that would have given his very life for hers ungrudgingly; a love that now, in all its cheated crime-stained hate, still lived in passionate, hungered misery for all it once had been!

His vengeance had made her what she now was, and now, beholding it, he suffered in it as much as she. That sun-crowned glory of his past!—it was gone for ever; gone like the bloom from these white lips of pain, for whose kiss he once had staked his soul; like the lustre from these dull tangled tresses, whose golden light had once made all his world; like the empire from this ruined life, whose beauty lay before him bruised, shattered, torn, and perished for ever more. And a great agony came on him, mightier than vengeance, vaster than hatred, deep as remorse. He had loved her as never now could he love again—he had loved her, paying down the peace and guiltlessness of his whole life at her word. And freshly, as though dealt but yesterday, the blow of her faithlessness smote him; he could not look on her; he could not breathe near her; he staggered from her where she lay, and felt his way blindly and feebly out into the evening air—down into the core of the woods, where no eyes beheld him;—down to the silent shores, where no step came, and the grey sea stretched in solitude.

He had thought his strength as iron, and it was weaker than the reed. He had thought to mould fate like deity; and an outcast's life, saved by the wanton caprice of the waters, rose in his path inexorable as destiny.

Hours later on he returned to White Ladies by the side-door of the western wing. His step was slow, his proud head stooped and bent. Strathmore,

to whose nature defeat had once seemed impossible, was vanquished, broken, netted in, in the meshes of his own past acts ; and while an innocent life loved him and was pledged to his, the darkness of his own left him no fitness for its pure presence.

Marion Vavasour was once more in his fate ; so near him that his own peasants sheltered her, that the woods of his own lands shut in the wretched shed where she was harboured. And he could do nothing ; he could not thrust her out from the beggars' charity she was given ; he could not drive her from his home, and forbid those who succoured her to give her the pile of straw and cup of water that alone kept existence in her. Lord here though he was, and free to command what he would, he could not exile an outcast from the cabin of the poorest that lived upon his land ! His hands were bound. She must haunt him as she would—there was no refuge. One thought alone remained to him. Lucille must leave him ; she must not stay where the murderer of her father had once been in her sight, had once been *pitiéd* by her tender charity ! What he had said to her, even in its sweetness, even in its first soft and forgetful moments, weighed heavily on him, with a sense as of evil committed, of danger drawn down on her. What right had he to her love ? What right had he to have bound her life with his ? Fear, misery, the instinct to save her from her father's destroyer, and a resistless longing impulse to tell her how he loved her, and take her to his heart to shield

her there for ever, had hurried him in one unconscious instant into what had all the day through—what even still—seemed to him a sin and an impiety against the dead and her. The die was cast; yet none the less did the gain of her love seem crime in him, did the future that must unite their lives seem darkened and forbidden.

As his steps wearily paced the length of the long corridors, at a distance he saw her, alone in the conservatories, lying under the clusters of oriental foliage, with the great palm-leaves drooped above her, and the brilliancy of autumn flowers clustering at her feet. The white light shone on her, and on the careless grace, the dreaming joy, the abandoned happiness, the childlike rest of her repose, pure and without a shade; happiness so deep and new that it still trembled at itself, was still told in all her attitude, in the very droop of the lashes over her musing eyes, in the very smile that lingered on her parted lips, in the very flush that even in solitude was bright upon her cheek.

He had erred? Surely not, since she was happy through him?

As he approached, she started and raised her head; the light which would never dawn there save for him chased the thoughtfulness from her eyes; the colour deepened in her face; she sprang up, then paused with the wild, shy, delicate grace of the deer—in that moment she was so exquisitely fair! Doom to grief and loneliness that fairy child in the years of her earliest youth? It would have been as brutal as to

wide it is to the left in the first room of the wing, so  
to let with a view of the garden lawn as it looked in  
the earlier autumn days, and covered the house in  
full view.

He stretched out his arms to her, and brought all  
affect that her life was his to treasure and to guard.  
"Oh! my wife, my love, my darling! You said  
that all pain falls in me; that none comes to thee  
through my love?"

With his accustomed measured step, Strathmore  
crossed the great length of the windowwing-room,  
and approached the place where his mother sat alone; he looked up, and as the light fell upon his  
face, she saw a change on it, a great softness that  
changed its melancholy and its resolve.

Her thoughts were weary, the farewell of her  
young grandson had filled them with his grief; but  
in the presence of Strathmore she ceased to re-  
member the sorrow, bitter but innocent, of youth,  
and a sudden fear fell on her: that look upon his  
face told her much.

Her son stood before her, and his words were very  
brief:

"Mother,—let the past be buried for ever. Lucille  
will be my wife."

"Yours!"

"Yes. Why not? Why not?"

His voice was defiant, almost fierce, as though  
challenging the power which should dispute his will  
and sever them.

“Why? *You* ask that, Cecil?”

She had risen, and fronted him; in her eyes the pitilessness which he had inherited with her blood, on her face the coldness which in her earlier years had been unchastened and unsoftened.

The words struck Strathmore keenly as a knife; his head bowed, his lips quivered—this man bent silent and without defence before the sternest and most unsparing cruelty of words which rebuked him with his sin.

“Have pity!—for her sake!”

His voice trembled in its humbled prayer; and his mother’s heart smote her for the stripes with which she had struck him where he was defenceless. She laid her hand softly on his shoulder, her face no longer stern, but blanched with a great horror.

“Forgive me, forgive me! But, oh, my son, it cannot be, it must not be—”

“It *shall* be.”

She knew the tone of old; the inflexible will of the Strathmores of White Ladies, than which iron were easier to bend, fire were easier to cross; and she was silent. This marriage! She shuddered from it as from some great sin, from some inevitable evil; yet—she had no power to avert it, no power to arrest it; she could not turn traitress to her son, she could not unfold to the life which was centred in his, the history which would be its surest death-blow?

“It shall be—who shall prevent it?” said Strathmore, and his voice rose slightly louder. “My own

stifle the young bird in the first music of its song, as to slay with a blow the trusting fawn as it looked up with earnest, lustrous gaze, and caressed the hand it followed !

He stretched out his arms to her, and forgot all save that her life was his to treasure and to guard :

“ Oh ! my child, my love, my darling ! God send that all pain falls on me ; that none comes to thee through *my* love ! ”

With his accustomed measured step, Strathmore crossed the great length of the withdrawing-room, and approached the place where his mother sat alone ; she looked up, and as the light fell upon his face, she saw a change on it, a great softness that changed its melancholy and its resolve.

Her thoughts were weary, the farewell of her young grandson had filled them with his grief ; but in the presence of Strathmore she ceased to remember the sorrow, bitter but innocent, of youth, and a sudden fear fell on her : that look upon his face told her much.

Her son stood before her, and his words were very brief :

“ Mother,—let the past be buried for ever. Lucille will be my wife.”

“ *Yours !* ”

“ Yes. Why not ? Why not ? ”

His voice was defiant, almost fierce, as though challenging the power which should dispute his will and sever them.

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“ It shall be—who shall prevent it?” said Strathmore, and his voice rose slightly louder. “ My own

peace I would sacrifice, my own life I would give up—what I had suffered would have mattered nothing—but hers I will never surrender. That course is right which most shields her. I swore to keep her years from every grief; I will redeem my oath. Shall *I* strike her? shall *I* curse her? Where would be the atonement I vowed to her father? Would he bid me destroy her young life? Would he see expiation to himself in her misery through the very love which he bade me foster? To whom, had he now been living, would he have given her so gladly as to me?—”

The swift, imperious, resolved passion in his voice ceased suddenly, his lips quivered again; he thought with what gladness and what faith Lucille, drawing closer the bond of their brotherhood, would have been trusted to his keeping as to the friend best known and best beloved, by the man whom he had slain, had he been living now!

His mother looked at him; and her courage failed her to pierce by one added sting the wound laid open so deeply and bared without defence. She knew that his decision, once declared, was unalterable; she could not dispute it, or persuade it, and there was truth in what he said, that to consign to bitterness the young and joyous years of Lucille, were to cancel all that had been done as obedience to the dead, and leave worse than unfulfilled the office bequeathed him. Yet—he her husband—*he!*

She shuddered, and her hands locked close upon his arm.

“ Strathmore ! Strathmore !—wait. If she should ever know——”

His face grew whiter for the moment ; the thought froze his very heart.

“ Know ! She *cannot*. No living soul could find a trace of her birth.”

Her hand leant heavier on his arm, and her voice was sunk to a tremulous whisper :

“ But is crime ever buried ? It sleeps, but it is never dead ; and oh, my son, my son ! its prey is so often the innocent !”

He laughed—a hopeless laugh, bitterly, bitterly sad.

“ What ! even *you*,—my mother !—deny that my guilt can reach atonement ! Then remorse is a fool’s travail, and the sinner must live for ever in the hell he has made to himself ! It is a harsh law—still—not harsher than *I* merit.”

The despair in his voice recoiled back on her own heart, and her eyes filled with tears, the slow, salt tears of age.

“ Cecil, my son, my son ! would *I* condemn you ? Remorse is holy to God, sacred in man. The prayer of my life is that yours may be blessed. But—but—I confess it, for *you* to wed her——”

“ Peace !” broke in Strathmore, with passionate force. “ We have said enough. My resolve is taken ;

my hand is pledged ; Lucille will be mine. Let us never speak again of what we have spoken to-night. Seek her, the innocent child ! rejoice with her, give her tenderness, give her love. Henceforth you must show her that she is more to you than she has ever been."

With these brief words of command, rather than of entreaty, he bowed low with his distant and punctilious courtesy, and left her presence ; his mother knew that what he had chosen was irrevocable.

" You love him so well, my darling ? " she said, softly, that night ; and as Lucille's head was raised for one swift moment, and her face uplifted in its shy joy, the aged and world-worn woman who looked on her ceased to wonder that he bade the dead past lie sealed within its grave, and sought to shield for ever in his own bosom the dawning life which had known but the cloudless sunlight of childhood till it awakened to the richer, deeper lustre of its future.

Yet the shadow of the past was on her ; and she dreaded it.

On the morrow he left for Paris, and Lucille, with his mother, quitted White Ladies.

He could not wait there, could not have *her* stay there, while in that cabin on the shore Marion Vavasour lay, tendered by beggars' charity !

## CHAPTER IX.

## “AND UNFORGIVING, UNFORGIVEN.

IT was twilight as Strathmore paced slowly up and down one of the deserted allées of the Bois de Boulogne, while the fallen leaves were strewn beneath his feet, and the shades of the night drew on: he waited for Valdor.

The fiery Henri Cinquiste, rarely given to prudence, had now a value and sweetness in his life too great to let him risk it rashly; and he was proscribed in Paris, and could only venture out when evening fell. Strathmore waited for him, pacing the long aisle under the red-brown boughs, hanging stirless in heavy air;—the same allée where, in the years that were gone, in the amber sunlight he had watched the speeding of his vengeance as the Discrowned had passed through her long pilgrimage of insult and of outrage.

In the twilight a man's form came swiftly towards him, and he saw in the rapidity of the step, and the

look, which by the still lingering light he could read upon his face, with what joyous and fearless hope Valdor came to the meeting. For him he felt the deepest pity he had ever known ; Strathmore now grieved sincerely and unselfishly for the grief of another. The tenderness of his own love for Lucille had softened the coldness of his heart ; it had made him humane—it had made him compassionate. He was in no wise blamable towards Valdor ; on the contrary, he had fulfilled his word, and acted with the strictest justice and generosity in his dealing with the cause of his absent rival ; and yet he felt something of self-reproach for the hope which, in honourable though erroneous belief, he had been the one to confirm, and which he must now be also the one to destroy.

With glad eagerness Valdor came up to him, and Strathmore held out his hand with the generous cordiality of his earlier years ; but, as he met his eyes, the coldness of a sudden and unlooked-for dread came over the French Noble : he saw in them a look wholly new there—the look of *pity*.

“ Tell me the worst at once, Strathmore,” he said, quickly. “ I cannot bear suspense. Is it——”

Strathmore, in the simple impulse of a genuine sympathy, turned from him as he answered, and his voice was gentle and mellow :

“ It is I who am to blame, though, God knows, I believed honestly what I told you. Forgive me ; I misled you, you misled yourself, Valdor.”

He did not look upon the face of the man to whom

he was compelled to deal so deadly a wound, but he heard the quick, sharp catch of his breath.

“ Is there no hope ? ”

His voice was husky and inarticulate ; that which answered him was tender and compassionate.

“ None. I grieve that I ever deceived you.”

They stood together under the yellow autumn trees, and, looking on him now, Strathmore saw how keen and mortal was his pain. Valdor had forgotten all in that moment, save the bitter, sudden desolation which struck down all the tender and vivid hope that he had cherished, until it had become well-nigh as sweet to him and as sure as certainty.

He turned, and walked swiftly up and down the allée with his head bent for some seconds ; he could not bear that another man should look on what he felt. His belief had been so strong that his love was returned !—and the hot ardour of a Southern’s passion was blended with the chivalrous tenderness in which he held her, till the thought of Lucille had become the core and the soul of his life.

He paused suddenly before Strathmore, and in the gloom his cheek was pale, and his lips worked painfully, while in his eyes and his air there was a hot and haughty defiance.

“ She loves another ? ”

Strathmore looked steadily at him, and in his gaze there was a deep compassion still ; he grieved honestly and generously for the pain before him.

“ She does.”

“Who is he?”

There was menace in Valdor’s answering glance: his own sudden sharpness of anguish made him unjust, and his fiery anger rose in revolt against his unknown rival.

Strathmore looked at him, and spoke with a rare and singular sympathy in the gentleness of his voice; the young love of Lucille lay warm in his heart, and made him more merciful to all men, specially so to those who had sought her in vain.

“Valdor, hear me first. What I said to you I honestly believed, or I had never spoken it. I thought that Lucille loved you. I told her word for word what you desired me. I did your cause every justice —you know me, and you know that I should do so. I give you my word of honour, that I dreamt as little as yourself that I should have now to tell you what——”

“Who is loved by her?”

The question broke fiercely and swiftly in upon his words; suspicion flashed on him, for the glance of her rejected lover saw the altered look which had come upon Strathmore’s face since the night when they had parted beneath the palms, a look of light, of rest, of relief, of something that was *almost* happiness.

“I am.”

“*You!*”

They faced each other in the twilight, and their eyes met. Strathmore’s face was calm, filled still with much of compassion, and free to all scrutiny, for to

Valdor's cause he had done his duty honourably and fully, and he deserved no reproach at his hands. Valdor's was deeply flushed ; there was danger in it, and the tumult of a jealous passion.

“You ! God in heaven, then you lied to me !”

Strathmore's face grew dark ; the lightning leapt to his eyes for a second—only for that,—he could make extenuation and have patience here, and there was nothing harsher than a proud and just dignity in his look and in his words :

“In a calmer moment you will see you do me injustice. It would not be possible for any man who knows my name to accuse me of cowardice or dis-honour. I kept my word to you strictly ; it was an after hazard which revealed to me what when we parted I dreamt as little as you.”

“She loves *you* !—*you* !”

There was something almost of terror and incredulity, mingled with the jealousy, with which he stood before Strathmore in the gloom of the early night. Strathmore bent his head ; some passion was rising in him, and he would not allow it rein ; with the soft touch of Lucille's lips in their first kiss, gentleness had stolen into his heart, and wakened compassion in him towards those who suffered.

“And you—you return it ? you allow it ? you will wed her ?”

A haughty anger passed over Strathmore's face :

“Assuredly. I shall become her husband.”

As he spoke the words, the winds, slowly rising, swept up with a hollow and melancholy moan through the dying leaves of the autumn trees.

Valdor looked at him, the blood staining his face, his breath thick and laboured, his words stifled in his throat :

“ *Her husband!* Never, if I live ! You have betrayed me, and you shall renounce all thought of her !”

Strathmore’s teeth clenched, but he strove to hold down his wrath, and he succeeded ; it was with a melancholy and proud forbearance, the more worthy that it was so alien to his nature, that he answered now :

“ Those are strange words, but you have a right to feel bitterly, and I must wait till with reflection and time you do me more justice. I can but give you my word that I acted in honour and honesty to you, while I had no thought that her love——”

“ Her love, *hers* ! I swear to Heaven you shall renounce such an unhallowed, unnatural, forbidden union,” cried Valdor, wildly and blindly, with imperious command. “ Strathmore ! listen to me. I may never wed her, but neither shall you. I forbid such a marriage, I arrest it ; you shall renounce it to-night and for ever !”

“ You ? Are you a madman ?”

He spoke calmly yet, but the forbearance was passing from his soul and the pitying tranquillity from his face, though the meaning of the words he heard did

not as yet dawn on him, for he deemed the secret too safely buried to be ever brought to light; no living being knew Lucille as Erroll's child.

Valdor drew nearer still to him, his hot blood up, his eyes lit with dangerous menace, his pain blinding him to all memory, save that the man before him was his rival, who had robbed him of what he loved.

“ *I arrest it, I forbid it ! By the God above us you shall never be the husband of Lucille.*”

Strathmore's arms were folded with his habitual attitude across his chest, and his eyes looked steadily into the face of Valdor, in the deepening of the night.

“ *You forbid it ?—and how ?*

“ *I shall tell her that you were the murderer of her father.*”

The words broke, abrupt and hideous, on the silence,—Strathmore started, his face grew white in the grey gloom, and into his eyes came a terrible hunted agony; was he ever to strive towards peace, and ever to have it shattered from his grasp ? He lost the strength, the memory, the calm which might still, at cost of truth, have baffled his accuser; any who had looked on him then would have pitied to their heart's core the man whose haughtiest pride, whose humblest remorse, were alike powerless to wash out and to atone for a repented past: any,—save one who loved where he loved !

“ *You—you——*” he gasped; then his voice died,

his dread, his anguish were less for himself than they were for her whose death-blow would be the knowledge of his crime.

Valdor looked on him *without* pity, for the evil spirit of a jealous passion possessed him, and while it reigned darkened his heart, and drove thence all compassion, all mercy, all generous chivalry to his rival.

“Ay! Here, where you slew him, I swear she shall know that the hand which she would caress as her husband’s, took the life which gave her own. Will she wed you *then*? Ask yourself!”

“Wed me—you would be her death!”

His voice was filled with a fearful misery, for it was her life which hung in the balance and not his alone. He had no thought to mislead the man who thus accused him; for his strength had broken down before the sudden danger, and the nature of Strathmore, when the world had not warped it, was instinctively truth; truth, be temptation, or cost what they might.

“Her death! Better that than marriage with her father’s assassin!” broke in Valdor, bitterly, in his despair he grew cruel and reckless. “If you would spare her, renounce that; swear to me that never, whether I live or die, shall Lucille be your wife, or I arrest your union at any cost, by letting her know you as you are. She is the daughter of Erroll; she shall hear how he fell by the hand of the friend he trusted more than a brother!”

Strathmore quivered like a woman who is dealt a brutal blow; he was struck where his strength was paralysed, he was wounded where he had no shield. In the reality of his remorse, he held the vilest words which could scourge his sin but his due chastisement, to be taken in silence and submission; and here he had no force, no defiance, no power, for *she* was menaced! And for her he stooped as for himself he would have never done.

He stood before Valdor, his head drooped, his face livid, his hands outstretched in the first prayer of supplication to which he had ever bent to any living man.

"Your words are bitter, but *I* merit them; were they a thousandfold harder *I* should have no title to resent them. *I*, 'a murderer!' *I* am at your mercy, so is *she*; *I* would not ask it for myself, but for *her*—for *her*."

His voice dropped inarticulate, with strong effort he commanded it, and spoke again, lifting his head with the dignity natural to him, touchingly mingled with the self-humiliation so alien to his nature.

"You have my secret; measure my thirst for expiation by the vileness of my crime—it is as great, greater it could not be! She was his trust to me; in her peace, her life, lies my sole power of atonement to him. For the love of God, spare me *that*! By your power, be generous! By your tenderness to *her*, do not deal her her death-blow! She is innocent, would you strike her?—destroy her?—curse her soul with

that deadly tale of vilest guilt? Not as rival to rival, but as man to man I implore you. Have mercy—not to me, not to *me*—but to *her*!"

Not in the most victorious hours of his powerful oratory had his eloquence been so true as now, when it lay but in the broken, hollow words of a great agony—his haughty nature bent and stricken, his guilt confessed, his soul laid bare.

Alas! he who else had been swiftest to be touched and won by the prayer of a proud life laid subject, here was blind, and steeled, and without pity in that hour, for—he loved.

"Renounce your marriage, and she shall not know her father's blood is on your hands."

In the gloom of the night the words fell from the lips of the man who had his secret; and Strathmore learned the bitterness that lies in mercy denied to extremity.

"Renounce? I cannot! *My* peace I would surrender, *my* life you should have to torture as you would, I have no claim to pity, no right to joy!—but I cannot give up *hers*, I cannot leave her forsaken, insulted, her youth embittered, her life more than widowed? My God! it is *her* happiness that is my solitary atonement to her father. Wreck that! by my own hand, my own consent! Are you brute or man that you ask it? Would you be nearer her love because she were divorced by me?"

The blood stained Valdor's face, and on it came no pity.

“Renounce her!” he said, fiercely, “or she shall know you as you are!”

“You are resolved?”

“Yes, by the God above us!”

“So be it—do your worst!”

Then Strathmore lifted his head and stood erect; he pleaded no more, and on his face, calm now, the look of iron pride, of chill tranquillity—the look which was evil—had returned. It was his special and unhappy fate that whenever he strove—stroved earnestly—towards better things and gentler thoughts, there circumstance arose and turned him backward into darkness, and denied him to rise into the purer light.

In the night which had now only descended they fronted one another, the fiery menace of his foe met by a cold and fathomless defiance; and in Strathmore’s eyes, although the memory of him whom he had slain yonder in the poisonous gloom beside the old deer-water, still lay like a sacred chain binding down his passions, there was a glance dangerous to the man who had driven him to extremity. Then, without word or sign, he turned away from him and went slowly through the avenue, with his arms folded on his breast, while Valdor, with swift, uneven steps, swept onward, whither he cared not and knew not, into the dark sear woodland of the deserted place.

Fear need have followed him close as his shadow; he had wronged, and denied, and stung to extremity, when it was abased, and unveiled, and suppliant, a nature which never forgave.

## CHAPTER X.

## EVIL DONE THAT GOOD MAY COME.

THE knowledge that Valdor held the secret which, once told, must part for ever Lucille's life from his, left Strathmore stunned like a man felled by an unseen blow on the brain. He had believed that no living soul could find trace of her birth, and the stroke fell suddenly and without warning, paralysing the hand which had deemed its strength strong to all control of circumstance. He was wound beyond escape in the folds of fate, as the Laöcoon in the serpent coils. And the sickening sense of *powerlessness*—the most terrible torture, I think, which this world holds, certainly the most terrible to one whose will is forcible, and whose habit is to rule—tightened about him, and stifled his very life.

He lost all sense, save that of an impotent despair, in which he tore at his bonds and writhed beneath the retribution of his past; a maddened, feverish

agony, under whose goad all the evil of his nature rose, a giant in its desperation. His own life he would have flung down a prey to any fate that could have seized it; but hers!—there was no sin that Strathmore would have shrunk from to ward off from her fair and sacred innocence the dark curse of his buried crime.

It left him no more than the sheer wild instinct of self-preservation, such as that on which men and brutes act in a moment of supreme and hideous peril. His calm had been shattered, he had lost that keen acumen which in statecraft placed him beyond rival—that cool, clear wisdom which led him, unerring, to men's every weakness and every impulse. Else, had he judged more truly of his foe; else, had he known that—his swift Southern passion once bated—justice and mercy would have revived in Valdor, and his hand would have withheld the blow which could not have avenged him, save by striking at the one whom he loved most gently and most chivalrously. It was not in the nature of the French Noble to be merciless or cruel; a generous repentance followed swiftly on every thought or act of passion—it did so now.

The jealousy of a love which, at the very moment of its sweetest hope, had been denied and dashed to earth, had goaded him for the hour into hatred and resolution inexorable as those of the man they menaced. He saw in Strathmore but the rival who had robbed him; he wronged him, in the hot haste of a bitter disappointment, by the belief that he had be-

trayed the embassy entrusted to him ; he grasped, in the desperation of his love, at the revenge which would sunder her for ever from the lover who stood before him. And for the hour Valdor was blind with that passion which makes men devils ; and was without pity for him who had been pitiless.

But, as the grey morning dawned, and the day rolled on, through whose dreary length he was chained to his chamber for the sake of the cause which he served, lest his presence should be known in Paris, the selfish spirit left him, and the nobler regained its hold. The bitterness relaxed, with which he had been drunk as with raki, till humanity was deadened by it, and no thought was left him but revenge ; justice came back to him, and all the softer thoughts of a love which was essentially pure and true arose, and made him shrink from a vengeance which must strike at *her*. His heart smote him for the mercilessness with which he had been steeled to the prayer of the proud nature which had stooped to plead, and to the remorse which had been laid bare before him in its anguish for expiation. He saw that, as great as had been the crime of this man, so was his repentance sacred ; his conscience recoiled from undoing the labour of such repentance, from destroying the innocent with the sin of the guilty, from smiting him who strove towards a just atonement with the deeds of his own past.

He knew how Lucille loved Strathmore, for he had studied that love, and feared it, till a false hope had

blinded him with its traitor-sweetness. He knew now how the man whom the world called heartless and conscienceless, had been scourged by the flail of remorse, and had centred his sole power of restitution in one young frail life. And the nobler nature wrestled in him with that which was more evil, and overthrew the baser. "His remorse is holy—it is not for me to touch it. Had she loved me I should have reverenced his secret; because her love is his, shall I turn traitor?" This was the true instinct of a gallant heart; and as the long brown autumn day ended and night stole near, he rose armed with such strength as men may best bring to meet the bitterness of cheated hope and joy dashed down for ever, and went out into the falling twilight to say this, and this only, to him whom Lucille loved.

And as he felt the first cool rush of the evening wind, and left the solitude of his chamber for the chilly yellow night, a shadow stole towards him, and he was arrested—a State Prisoner.

In the stillness of that midnight Strathmore stood beside the tomb where deep in the stainless marble was carved the record of his crime. The white autumn mists were heavy on the air, the winds sighed among the long grass that blew above Erroll's grave, and the gold-leaved boughs of the dying trees swayed over the stone where he was lain in the dark dank earth—forgot by all save one.

Strathmore stood there beside the resting-place of the man whom he had slain in all the noon and glory of his manhood ; and his heart was sick with the deadly pain of the past, and with the burden of the future. For evil had seized *both*. And the sin-taint from that which was gone, breathed over, and reached, and poisoned the fair years ungrasped.

He knew that the past, once told, would be as surely death to her as the touch of poison or the breath of pestilence ; he knew that Lucille, living but in his love, would be smitten more gently by the fellest disease that ever seized the loveliness of youth, than by the words which should bid her see in him who sought her with a husband's tenderness the destroyer of those who gave her birth. It was not his own passion, his own peace, his own joy ; not the shelter of his crime, or the years of his future, or the desire of his soul which was at the stake and in the balance—*these* he would have given up a prey to any fate, a meet sacrifice to any vengeance that befel him ; what were in jeopardy were *hers*—his trust from the man whom he had loved as David loved the son of Saul, whom he had slain as Cain slew the son of Eve.

She must be spared.

This was the sole thought, the sole sense that was left him. He had been denied mercy. And, swift as naphtha to flame, under the torture, all the worst in him leapt to life. With that denial his resolve was taken, blind, and knowing neither how nor when its

way would be pioneered, but fixed and inflexible—the resolve to silence at any cost, at any peril, the rival whose knowledge of his secret menaced Lucille. Alas for him! Strathmore had not yet learned that it is not given to man to mould the shape and way of fate at will, and that to do evil that good may come, is but to add sin to sin, sepulchre to sepulchre.

When he left his foe in the still autumn night his will was set, forged to iron in the fires of an agonised and imminent terror. Crime itself looked holy in his sight if for her, and all that could save *her* was justified to him. And he had ever in him too much of the passionate imperious Cæsarian choice: “Let him murder, but let him reign!”

Yet, it had been truly said of him, “A bad man sometimes, a dangerous man always, but a false man—never.” He recoiled from the sole means of preservation which rose within his grasp as he would from some dastard poison with which he had been tempted to still the foe who held his secret. Strathmore, guilty in much, and cruel where his will was crossed, had no taint of the traitor in him. Great crimes might stain him, but baseness or perfidy had no lodging in his nature. His creed of honour was lofty, knightly, unsullied—the creed of the stately nobles whose blood was in his veins—and an act that even drew nigh the vileness of betrayal was loathsome, and had ever been impossible to him.

Yet here, in the blindness of dread, in the suddenness with which he saw Lucille threatened, and knew

that he must either silence the lips which could breathe his secret, or see her life destroyed—here, there rose but one means of salvation for her, and to shield her he grasped it. Anything, I have said, looked just to him which should be done to save the innocent from the burden of his guilt; all, that for himself he would have withstood, grew to him a resistless tempting, a sin righteous and imperative, when it stood out before him as the sole force by which he could rescue her from destruction by his own hand—the hand pledged to her as her husband's.

The ordeal was fearful to him. His soul recoiled from evil, and, “as the hart panteth for the water-springs,” thirsted for peace—peace of heart, peace of conscience. And it escaped him—ever, ever. He was driven on and on unceasing—forced to sin that the innocent might be saved, forced to do evil that good might come.

His influence was not seen in his work; none knew that his mind had conceived it; silently, wisely, with a master's finesse, with an unerring skill the web was woven, the mine was sprung, by means the subtlest yet simplest; a word, a hint—nay! scarce so much—and the State hounds were set on the slot of Henri Cinq's Royals. Strathmore had known the projects of that too frank and too chivalrous party; a thread dropped which could not be traced to him, a suggestion lent which could not involve its speaker, a counsel given which was but the well-advised warning of a foreign minister to a friendly court; and he

who had been so rash in the bitterness of cheated love as to menace one who never spared friend in his path, and never aimed save to strike home, was flung into a State prison, where the loyal heart would consume in silence, and the knightly spirit would break in solitude, till the cell should be changed for the galley bench of the Bagne or the malarious swamp of Cayenne.

Strathmore had wrought the ruin of the man who had braved him—wrought it with the subtle, yet passionate and unfaltering will with which his race destroyed whatever was bold enough, and mad enough, to cross their road, and oppose their power. But his soul had revolted from it, and in it he had endured for Lucille what for no other stake he would have suffered. He would have refused to save himself by such a cost ; he paid it to save her. He, whose honour his foulest enemies could not impeach, knew himself false to the man who had placed faith in him ; the cowardice of betrayal tainted, in his own sight and his own knowledge, the act by which his rival and his foe had been given up to a doom not less inexorable, scarce less cruel, than the grave ; for the single time in a long life, which, unscrupulous, pitiless, and darkly stained, had yet never been soiled with one unknightly taint, he knew himself a traitor to his trust, a traitor to his creed.

And he stood there beside the tomb of the dead man for whose sake he had done this thing.

“Traitor ! traitor !” said Strathmore, in his teeth,

and in his eyes was a terrible wistful misery as they gazed down on the black grass that grew thick above Erroll's grave. "I only needed to be *that!* Heaven help me! I said her life should be before my own. So it has been, so it shall be. It is done for *your* sake, in *your* trust. Oh, God! surely for you, though not for me——"

Not for himself—never for himself—but for the dead whom he loved, and the hallowed life that he guarded, surely, he thought, the work of his expiation would not fail at the last?

Following the consequence that links one sin on to another, he had plunged headlong down into additional crime; as a man, having once set his foot into the loose quicksands, is drawn step by step, lower and lower, powerless to wrench himself free from the devouring mass, sinking farther and farther, locked in and sucked downward till he is lost for ever, while the sun is bright above head, and the horrors of the grave yawn for him alone—for him by whom one false step first was made.

In the very hour when all his heart ached with its yearning for a purer life; in the very moment when he had taken to himself the treasure and the trust of another existence to be bound in his own, in the very instant when all that was vile in him seemed to have fallen away, and he had sworn to consecrate such years as might remain to him, to unremitting effort to assoil his life, and give it such worthiness as he

could still reach, to be in union with Lucille's—in that very instant temptation had again assailed him, and he had fallen beneath it; crime had again come ready to his hand, and he had stretched out his hand and taken its iniquitous aid, its shameful succour. Were the idle myths of superstition true, were the fables of benighted priests real, he asked himself, with cruel self-mockery and self-reviling; and had he sold his soul to some fiend of darkness that he could never make his escape from sin, but always seized it and became one with it like this? Was he devil-possessed that he could never resist the guilt he loathed, but was forced down into it, and dwelt, as though he loved it, always in some deeper depth of its pollution, some closer bond of its fellowship and communion?

No man living on earth could have hated him, as he hated himself. No man have thought his infamy so deeply damned, as he himself knew it to be. The act that had made him a murderer, was scarce so vile in Strathmore's sight, as the act that made him a traitor!

He had saved her—but at what a cost! For her he would have given his life at any hour; but he had given far more now. His oath had been to sacrifice all things past, and present, and future, to the keeping of her father's trust; and the fulfilment of his oath had become more than the sacrifice of mere existence: it was the acceptance of a long and living martyrdom—the martyrdom, not of renunciation,

which guiltless may bring strength to its own torture, but one that could have no such solace—the martyrdom of shame! Shame! none the less, but the more, because like his doom, it was unknown and unchastised by man.

Traitor!

The word sounded in his ear night and day; it lay like a curse upon his name; it mocked him in his memory with every honourable phrase that others uttered to or wrote of him; when he went among his peers he knew himself not fit to have place near them; when their unstained hands met his, or their frank words applauded him, he knew that if they could tell the infamy that was upon him, they would leave his presence as they would leave any black-guard's who had robbed their treasures—he had been false to all the dignity of his order, to all the honour of his manhood. He knew it; the open scorn of Europe could not have made him know it more terribly. Strathmore—in all his guilt a man who held, with all the loyalty of a proud nature, and the ingrained instinct of a patrician creed, to the most stringent laws of honour; a man who, in all his worst errors would never by nature have become false, but who would have cut off his right hand rather than have sullied his lips with a lie, or betrayed the meanest thing that crawled if it had once trusted him—suffered in the consciousness of disgrace, in the enforced shame of this sin so alien to his every instinct and his

every act, a torture which beggared all that life had ever brought him.

It might have been less terrible if he could have suffered openly for it; for with every time that he took the world's homage, every time that he moved amongst his own order, he felt himself afresh a traitor against it and them—letting them honour what *he* knew dishonoured. His nature, moreover, was one to give itself up without appeal to all the chastisement that was his due; and here no hand chastised, no voice upbraided, and no judges stoned him; what he had done was unknown, unseen, and he was compelled to go to what *was* joy, even all darkened and tainted as it was; joy that he was conscious by every justice should never have been his. He had to go to the sweetness of Lucille's tender words, to the caress of her young lips, to the beauty of her reverent and happy love; he had to go to all these things that make earth while they last an Eden, with the knowledge in his heart that turned them into bitterness. It was this loveliness waiting for him as reward for the treachery he had wrought, this happiness given to him as recompense for his sin, that made him seem to himself a thousand times more loathsome. If he had done this thing to save her, while giving her to another's arms in his own sacrifice, he might have forgiven it to himself in some faint measure; but now although no thought, no memory of self had prompted him to it, although it had been done simply

and solely *for her*, the joy that came to him through it made it beyond all pardon in his sight. And it had a tenfold anguish, striking him back into the darkness of accumulated guilt at the moment when some beam of light, some ray of peace had strayed in on him; when with the love of Lucille he had vainly dreamt of regained tranquillity, of joy that would come to him out of her joy, of a purer happiness that might still be his, of a better life in which his later years might take their fairer hue from hers, and be spent with her in the effort towards nobler things. This hope, this dream, had come to him with the treasure of her innocent affection; it was gone for ever now. He almost dreaded the gaze of her eyes; he almost shuddered from the touch of her lips.

For the sin that he had sinned for her was heavy on him; and he had gained her by the crime of an Iscariot.

There is no guilt so terrible to him by whom it is done as the guilt that is *abhorrent* to the nature which yet stoops to it.

Late in the fall of an autumn evening he reached Silver-rest to meet her for the first time since he had done this last thing for her sake; in so utter yet so erring a sacrifice. The twilight was darkening over sea and land, though here in the sheltered south, flowers still blossomed and woods were still in full leaf. A little while,—and when he had parted from her, in the sweetness of her love he had thought that

there might still be in some sort peace for him, and pardon for his past ; he had thought that the future might still bring him some blessing, through her, and through the trust so loyally, so passionately obeyed. *Now*—he shrank from her presence ; he had not right or title to one shadow of the tenderness she gave him ; he felt that what he had done for her must, soon or late, bring its own punishment, that in *his* embrace even her own angel-like beauty must be tainted, her own fair God-given life be doomed and destroyed with his !

All the wild untamable nature in him suffered now ;—suffered, flinging down like film the philosophy of his creeds, the languor of his world, the egotism of his habits ; suffered with the dumb agony of an animal, the blind pain of an untutored barbarian. Nature was stronger even now than all the force of intellect, custom, sophism, and reason.

He believed at last in his own utter weakness ; he believed at last that he could not command oblivion.

He paused now, as he went to where they told him that she was, in the stillness of the twilight, on the wooded shores of Silver-rest. He longed for her with unutterable longing, yet he dreaded to see her as he had never dreaded any thing on earth ; a chill tremor passed over him, and he stopped to still the beating of his heart. He would have gone to the scaffold like Montrose or Derwentwater with unmoved serenity, without his pulse quickening its throb one instant ;—now going to one who revered him almost

as a deity, and for whose sake he had wrought the iniquity he loathed, he shook like a woman in every limb, and paused, as in the days of Hellas, the guilt-stricken paused before the threshold of the sacred temple they dared not enter.

Yet;—he must smile on her as though no chasm lay between them; he must look down into her trustful eyes; he must take her life into his own; he must become her husband. Was it not for this, this only that he had sinned?

In that moment he recoiled from his offered joy as he would never have recoiled from death. In that moment—once again—to lose her, or to wed her, seemed alike an anguish passing his strength. The brown still depths of leaves enclosed him, there was no light about his steps, the lull of silence was oppressive, the chiar'oscuro of the falling evening was only broken by the deeper blackness of some towering rock that lowered through the gloom; he paused there, hearing only the beating of his own heart; the darkness was like the darkness on his years, that had no place beside the bright spotlessness of hers. Then, with a sudden gesture, almost of despair, he dashed back the boughs, that parted them with that black barrier, as his own acts parted them in his own sight. He saw her there; in a flood of warmth from the setting sun that found its way about her, and bathed her in its halo, as, in the Old Masters, the Children of God are bathed in light; the crimson shafts of the red rocks slanting upward till they were lost in hang-

ing wreaths of mist; the scarlet and golden foliage encircling her; at her feet the violet waves of the calm waters; and full on her face the lustre of the dying sun's rays as they poured down from the west. Coming from the shadow of the gloomy woods, he saw her in that glory of radiance, pure as her life, radiant as her smile, divine as her innocence. What place had he beside her? With a great unconscious cry, that in that moment forgot all that must be sealed and silent for her sake, he threw himself before her ere she knew that he was near; there, at her feet, in that sunlit luminance that never now could touch his own dishonoured life, emblem of the peace and beauty he had for ever flung away; his arms about her, his head sunk in a suppliant's entreaty, his burning lips upon the hands he clasped.

“Oh! my child!—my treasure!—my darling! I have come back to you, but my life has no fitness for yours. And yet—oh, God!—I have given you more than my life; I have suffered for you more than a hundred deaths; I have denied you nothing; I have lost for you all I had left on earth. Love me, for the pity of Heaven! love me, come what will! It is for you that I have sinned, for you only that I live——”

The wild words died almost in their utterance, stifled in his throat, as he knelt before her, his head bowed, his arms thrown round her in the passion, less of an embrace than of an agonised prayer and supplication. The last, only, reached her ear; the last

which told her it was for her alone he lived, and which implored her tenderness. Vaguely, with a great terror, mingling with the dizzy sweetness of his sudden presence, she felt that he suffered, she saw that his life had a misery in it untold, unconfessed; and the love, greater still than all fear in her, and far deeper than her young years, gave her its truest instinct;—she had no thought of herself; she only felt that *he* suffered. Her soft lips, with a tremulous hesitance, met his in their first self-offered kiss, her eyes with a dark dreamy lustre gazed into his own through tears that rose but did not fall; her voice was broken with a deeper music than it had ever known:

“Ah, my lord! my love! have you yet to learn that my life is yours, and that your death will be mine?”

The words were few, and very low; but there was an accent in them that told that this, and nothing less than this, 'was the love she bore him; in the golden light and scarlet foliage that circled her, the radiance from the western skies shone in her eyes and bathed her still in its bright aureole, as though loth to leave a thing so fair to the cold shadows of the night. Looking upward he saw her thus in the warm glory from the evening rays;—sin should not have been *her* saviour! He knew it now.

He had sacrificed to her all he valued upon earth; he had beggared himself more utterly than poverty could have beggared him when, for her sake, he had

lost Honour ;—at the last, would even this be done in vain ?

“ Evil done that good may come.” Rash and unhallowed work which tampers with the Unseen, and sows the poison-seeds that the golden fruit may bloom ;—at the core of the fruit will not the poison ever be found ?

Yet if the cause of any earthly life could have justified that touching of unfolded destiny, hers would have been that one ; hers which he deemed he had done justly to spare at *any* cost, as he looked on her in her loveliness, and met the sweet, shy, half-veiled joy of her fair eyes.

His approaching marriage was made public, and the world saw nothing save that which was most natural in it. There was, true, some wide disparity of years between them ; but then he had altered so little in person from what he had been at thirty, and had an eminence of so brilliant a fame, that the world felt no wonder that in his maturity of prime and of power he should have fascinated, and been fascinated by, the beautiful youth of his ward. Once pledged to it, on the impulse of a moment that had been stronger than himself, he hastened his marriage with the least delay that was possible—hastened it with a restless, fevered impatience that shared far more in the disquiet of dread than in the softer anxiety of passion. The knowledge that one lived who knew his secret filled him with a ceaseless

and bitter fear ever gnawing at his peace ; *he* was silenced, from the grip that held him, Valdor would never again be free to come forth and lift up the veil that hung before that ghastly past ; yet, that this secret should be in the power of one living man, however that man were stricken powerless, filled with the deadly unrest of an ever-conscious, never-banished dread, the heart which, through a long life, had never learned before what it was to *fear*. In Lucille's presence this was lulled, in her absence it fastened on him resistlessly with a haunting, nameless terror. For Marion Vavasour, too, lived !—of her he could learn nothing, save that she had recovered in the peasant's hut that had given her shelter, and had gone from White Ladies ; gone none knew whither ;—she lived, though lost in the desert of the world. Danger had risen once ; never more could he feel secure it would not rise again, not again to be thus grappled with and hurled down before its touch could reach Lucille. It was this which made him hasten his marriage to its earliest ; he felt that her life was unsafe until placed beyond the power of man to sever from him, until guarded by him with the title and the power of a husband.

It was still but autumn, not a month from the hour when he had first betrayed to her his own love, when he stood with her the night before their marriage-day, looking on that life which still seemed to him too pure for the grosser touch of passion ; with which his

own was well-nigh to him as much profanity, and desecration, as the love of other men had seemed. There are lives in their first youth, ere childhood is wholly left, ere womanhood is one-half learned, which look too heaven-lent for *any* love, even the noblest and the best. Lucille's was one.

Without, that night, the seas ran high, and dark waves were flung against the granite headlands, and winds were wild among the tossing gorse; but where they stood in solitude there were warm scented air, and delicate bright hues, and flowers in all their summer blossom, and she neither saw nor knew the darkness of the night. His kiss was on her lips, his voice was in her ear.

“And you are happy?” Strathmore murmured, as he bent over her. Restlessly, wistfully, incessantly he asked this of one who took all her joy from him—the question whose answer he knew so well! But of that answer he was never weary—never weary of watching as he did now the rich love-light in her face, the gladness in her smile, while she nestled closer in his breast as to her best-loved, best-trusted shelter, half shy, half ashamed still, in the awe and beauty of her new and wondering joy.

She was happy—happy through *him*. Strathmore asked no more than this, and asked not this for his own sake. For, in his remorse, and in his expiation, the haughty arrogance of his nature was smitten down, humbled to lowest depths; and where he

stood, on that marriage eve, with her lips against his cheek, and her life sheltered on his heart, he bowed his head over her with an unspoken prayer:

“For her sake—in his trust—oh, God! that I may have power to keep her thus for ever!”

And in his heart a voice spoke—that voice so often stifled, so often disobeyed, so often rebelled against as weakness, that voice which men call conscience. “Why was evil done that good might come? Sin added yet again to sin is but barrier piled on barrier between a soul and its atonement.”

It was noon on the day of the solemnisation of his marriage, and Strathmore stood among some of the proudest of his order, speaking on the trifles of the hour with his habitual soft, low, slight laugh. The accustomed serenity was on his face, the courtly smile upon his lips, the languor in the cold, harmonious music of his voice; they saw in him but one of themselves, a subtle statesman, a consummate courtier, pursuer of a lofty power, reaper of a ripe ambition; *they* saw no change in him. But in his heart was the restless fever of a passionate disquiet, born from the gnawing consciousness of traitorous infamy wrought that good might be its offspring.

“God is my witness no impulse of passion, no vileness of self-pity, no thought of my own peace actuated me—it was for her, for her alone,” he told himself perpetually, and said aright; for passion he would have trampled out, self-pity was a weakness

that was unknown to him, and his longing to fulfil the trust of Erroll was holy, sincere, and without taint, though its fruit and its action were error. Yet a terrible unrest was on him; a sickening dread possessed him—he who had feared the laws neither of nature nor of man. Was the darkness of his own life fit to blend with the pure dawn of hers? Was a hidden sin such shield as should have guarded her?

He thrust thought from him, and it would return. He bade the past be buried, and it rose again. He strove to behold but the fairness of the future, and the dead years swarmed around and mocked him. He was master of all men save of himself!—and as he stood there, in his easy and courtly calm, on him were a foreboding, a fevered and nameless fear, unseen of men.

As Lucille came into his presence these were forgotten, and when he looked on her, he remembered nothing but the young love that was his own.

They who were gathered there were world-worn, languid, cold to much, indifferent to all; men and women who wore the purples of the patrician, and had long forgot the creeds, even where they still kept the years, of youth. Yet there were none among them who, seeing her on her bridal morning, were not touched to something of mournful and unbidden tenderness at sight of that fair and opening life. They did not know why they felt thus, they did not seek to know; thus, long ago, they might have felt, looking on the dawn of an early shadowless day, rising in

summer light, conscious themselves how soon that day must die, scorched by noon heats, and sunk in shadows of the night.

The low, sad lulling of the seas, beating on the sands without, sounded audibly through the stillness in Silver-rest. Without, the autumn day was wild, and fitful, and tempestuous, while the grey curlews flew with startled cries over the surf, and the yellow leaves of the scattered gorse were whirled upon the wind. But within, the chambers were filled with delicate colouring, with fair women, with the gleam of diamonds and sapphires, with the scent of a myriad of exotics, while the light fell warm and mellow about Lucille, and on the white coronal of the virginal and bridal flowers. As he bowed before her, and, leading her out, took his place beside her, the courtliness of his habitual manner, softened and tinged by the infinite tenderness he bore to her, no memory was on him then save of her beautiful youth, as her eyes drooped, full of shy dreamy lustre, and her face flushed in her soft awe, in her sweet shame. Her heart was subdued at the weight of its own joy. What had she done, she thought, that she should share his life as no other had ever shared it; that she alone, of all the world, should be thus loved and blessed by Heaven and by him?

The words of the marriage ceremonial commenced, while the ocean filled the stillness with the plaint of its mournful melody.

“I require and charge you both, as ye will answer

at the dreadful day of judgment, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed—”

The syllables fell slowly and solemnly on the hushed air, charging the confession of all sin or knowledge which could sever the lives that would be bound in one;—and he who heard them, while on his soul was the secret which uttered would part their lives for ever, stood silent: the words rolled onward, echoed by the melancholy burden of the seas where they broke, wave upon wave, on the distant shore.

*He* was silent; and what other lips could tell the crime of his buried past? None there. He had said, “Let the dead past bury its dead,” and the dead speak not.

Once only his face lost its enforced look of calm and grave tranquillity; it was when her hand touched and lay within his. Then the ritual which was uttered was lost on his memory; the scene that was around him grew unreal; the surging of the seas beat and throbbed through his brain; his eyes shrank from the young loveliness beside him, and his voice, as it pledged her a husband’s vows, sounded hollow in his ear. What he saw was the upward gaze of the dying man whom he had slaughtered, what he heard were the faint broken words, which, even in death, had *forgiven him*; and for one instant on his face came that look, hunted, terrible, guilt-stricken, which had come there when in the mists of the sunrise in the years long gone, he had read the message of the dead, the message

of pardon, which had written him out for ever in his own sight a murderer. In that hour it was not Lucille of whom he thought, it was not Lucille whom he saw; it was the friend whom he had loved and slain.

The moment passed; Strathmore recovered the control so rarely broken. His hand closed upon hers, his voice fell serenely on the silence, he bowed his head beside her, and unarrested the marriage words rolled on through the quiet calm, that was only filled with the dreamy lulling of the seas. His love was pledged her as her husband's. His hand closed on hers as the guardian of her life.

“Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder.”

On the deep stillness the words were uttered which bound their lives in the bond which the world would not sever, nor death annul.

And with her face flushed, as with the glory of her future, and luminous with the angel-light that Dante saw upon the face he loved in the Vision of the Paradiso, Lucille looked upward in his eyes—his Wife.

## CHAPTER XI.

## THE ROSES OF THE SPRING.

IT was the early springtide of the year.

The broad sunny waters by Sheen lay cool and tranquil in the light ; the woodland was in its first glad freshness ; the glades and gardens sweeping to the edge, and the white glistening walls of villas through the trees, were warm in the noon brightness ; and it was restful and lovely here, in a bend of the stream, beechen-sheltered, and with mossy islands breaking the wide river, and drooping their willows lazily into its waves. Down the stream floated a boat shaped like the Greek feluccas, a graceful water-toy, with sails like the silver seagull's wings, and gold arabesques glistening on its white carved sides, and azure cushions piled up on its couch ;—the nautilus-barge of a Nereid were not more daintily fair. And on the shore, under the sheltering trees, a woman sat wearily watching its course, half in apathy, half in

fascination. She was tired, travel-worn, haggard, heart-sick, where she sat, resting drearily there, looking out with sunken, sun-blind eyes blankly over the stretch of the waters ; and she gazed as though bound by a spell at the joyous sweep of the vessel : they were in a contrast so strange—she, the bitter, hopeless, beggared woman, crouching in the shadow, and that bird-like boat winging its way through the light, with the sun on its snow-white sails.

And she thought of her past, when her course through life had been proud, and patrician, and cloudless, and in the light of a noontide sun, like the course of that boat through the waters !

Nearer and nearer glided the Greek barge, while on its cushions lay a young girl in the first years of her youth, the awnings of azure silk above her head, a pile of hothouse roses lying in her lap, the sunlight falling on the fairness of her face, bright with a softer glory still—the glory of a life without a shadow, of a joy without a wish. She who sat on the shore looked and noted her with envying, evil gaze ; she knew nothing of her, but youth, joy, peace, the purples of the aristocratic order, the gladness of a loveliness gracious and beloved, these were accursed and abhorrent in the sight of the Outcast :—they had once been her own, though now there waited for her but the sepulchre of Age, the grave of Beggary.

Nearer yet floated the fairy felucca, as though bearing a Water-Fay to her river home, to her golden throne reared in the snowy bell of the lotus-flower ;—

floated till it was moored at a landing-stair close to where the solitary wanderer sat, who never moved, but gazed still, with the stupor of weariness at the toy-boat and its freight, as its young Queen rose from her azure nest, and passed over the carpets her attendants threw down before her feet, with a group of girl-patricians like herself, sunny as the morning.

Her white and delicate skirts almost swept the dust-stained dress of the lonely woman where she sat; and she looked down on her compassionately, pausing with that generous and loving pity for all who sorrowed and were in need, that was the divine instinct of a nature which, in the fulness of its own gladness, would fain have decreed that none should suffer. Of her she had no recollection.

“You are ill?” she asked gently, while the odour of the roses that filled her hands was wafted to the travel-tired wanderer.

“I am very weary!”

The words had a heart-sick depth of misery, and the voice which uttered them was strangely contrasted with the want and desolation of her loneliness—sweet, rich, and full of music still.

The contrast struck upon the young girl’s ear, and she paused, while her fair eyes, in whose depths the sunlight lay, gazed down on the hollow, sunken, haggard face at whose look she shuddered, even while it touched her to yet deeper pity, for there were in it something of fearful beauty, of wild grace, that nothing could destroy save death itself.

"Let me aid you," she said, stooping, while she dropped some gold into the wanderer's lap, the sweet and gracious compassion of the words robbing the alms of all bitterness that might lie to poverty in the charity of wealth. "This is but little; but if you come up to the house, we may be able to relieve you more."

The woman looked upon her, still with a blank stupor and an evil envy blended in her; and the sun shone on them—together; the wanderer, with the darkness of desolation and the shame of many years upon her, and the young girl, with the sun bright on her fair and fragile loveliness, on the fragrant burden of flowers that she bore, on the light gold of her perfumy hair, and on the beautiful smile that was less upon her lips than in her eyes, in their deep and happy radiance.

She moved to pass onward from the Pariah who crouched there in the beechen shadow; but as she moved she saw the look, which had flashed with something of proud, shrinking pain as the gold had fallen into her lap, fasten on and follow, with wistful, thirsty gaze, the blossom and the fragrance of the roses;—such a look as an exile gives on a foreign soil to flowers he remembers in his native land, whither he can never again return. With an impulse and gesture of exquisite grace, she gave the rich clusters to the lonely and travel-worn wanderer.

"You love flowers? Take them, they will comfort you."

While the softness of the pitying words still lin-

gered on the air, in charity more angel-like than the grudging charities of earth, she went onward with her fair, bright group of girlish aristocratic youth, soon lost to sight in the foliage of the villa woodlands; and Marion Vavasour sat in the gloom beside the reedy waters, with the roses lying in her lap, and their dreamy fragrance heavy with the perfume of the Past.

They were the flowers of her sovereignty, the flowers of her symbol; she had loved them with the poetic and artistic fancy which so strangely mingled with her panther cruelty, her murderous wantonness; a thousand buried hours lay coiled for her in the shut leaves of the moss-laden buds, a thousand memories uprose for her with the rich sweetness of their odorous dews, her youth, her loveliness, her power, all the golden glories that were for ever dead were sepulchred for her in the closed core of those scarlet roses.

Beggared by the arrest which had spared her liberty, but had confiscated all that she possessed and had banished her the city; beggared more utterly yet by the wreck of the vessel in which she had been bound for the New World; she, who had been more cruel in the days of her triumph than was ever beast of the desert goaded and ravening for prey, had sunk to the lowest depths of misery, of keen and bitter want, of wild and impotent despair; and, still denying God, believed at last in Retribution.

And she sat there looking blankly and blindly down on the fresh fragrant roses that the compassion

of a soilless life had laid upon those hands crime-stained as the murderer's palm; and she drank in, as with a desert-thirst, the fragrance that bore to her the perfume of her Youth, the fragrance of the emblems of her Past!

A step roused her: she looked up, wearily, from her stupor:

“Who was it gave me these?”

He who was passing, an old ferry-boatman, paused: “An angel on earth a'most, God keep her! The great minister's young bride. He's cold as ice to look at, but they do say that he just worships her.”

“Who is she?”

There was a terrible hurrying eagerness in the quiver of her voice.

“His lordship's wife, I tell ye, the Lady Cecil Strathmore.”

“Strathmore!”

The boatman had passed onward, and he did not hear the echoed name, in whose dry, stifled cry ran the intensity of hate. From where she sat in the heart-sickness of fatigue and of privation, she sprang up as a panther springs from its lair at scent of its foe and its prey, her limbs once more instinct with eager life, her form quivering with passion. She dashed the roses down on the wet sward and trod them beneath her feet, till their beauty was ruined, and trampled from all likeness of itself, even as was her own. She flung out into the river depths, with loathing gesture, the gold that had been given by

that tender and gentle pity ; in want and weariness, in poverty and despair, footsore, and with none to give her bread, a wanderer, and knowing not when night should fall where she should lay her head, she cast out to the waters' waste the alms that were of *his* wealth !

The insanity of a blind, reckless, cruel hate possessed her ; the hate, long-chained, baffled, powerless to find its vengeance ; the hate which was athirst to coil itself with deadly poison-folds about the life that was omnipotent and honoured amidst men, and hiss back in his ear the words by which he once had doomed her : " Such mercy as you gave, I give to you—no more ! "

At last, at last, she had learned where to strike ; and though her hands were empty now, some weapon, that would deal the death-blow to his life through what he loved, would not be long unfound.

To that reckless and tigress lust, what were the gentleness of the youth which had paused to pity her suffering, the divine compassion which had succoured the stranger and the desolate ?—to the soul that was seared with evil and envy, and the deep guilt of murderous passions, they were but as oil to the burning, but as fuel to flame.

When the night fell over the river-maisonnette, which had been one of the bridal-gifts of her husband to Lucille, and where they came at the close of most weeks, that in the world she had now entered she

should not wholly lose the freshness and the solitude in which she had dwelt from infancy, and which had made waters, and woodlands, and the sweep of free forest winds, the life of her life, Marion Vavasour, unseen, made her way through the aisles of the gardens, stealing with noiseless footfall, as the cheetah through the jungles.

Her youth for ever dead, her loveliness for ever lost, no end left for her but beggared misery and wretched age, and the death-bed of the homeless and the outcast, she had but one goal, one passion, one future—revenge; and like the cheetah she could crouch, waiting with untired patience for the hour when her spring could never miss. Love she had never known, save for her own beauty, her own guilty power; but hate, the cruel, cowardly, wanton, vengeful nature of Marion Vavasour—a woman in her wickedness as in her weakness, in her crimes as in her cowardice—knew in its deadliest and most ruthless desire. Not with philtre or with steel had she any thought to destroy what she hated; her hand would have shaken *there*, for her heart would have shrank from the physical peril that would have recoiled on herself; true to her sex, she thirsted for a more cruel and a more craven vengeance; she longed to destroy by some subtler torture—to say to him, as he had said to her, “*You shall live to suffer!*”

She made her way, shunning detection, through the still, cool avenues and gardens, where the starlight was trembling in the white spray of fountains, and

the linden-leaves were filling the night with their odour. She had no purpose, no object, save to watch as the snake watches what he dares not attack; save to feed, by looking on its goal, the hate which fastened full as brutally on the young life which had been filled with merciful compassion for her loneliness and poverty, as on his which had bade her perish in the darkness of the waters, and left her to sink downward to her grave.

Her eyes gazed round as she moved onward; the scent of the air, the gleam of the statues among the foliage, the voices of the nightingales thrilling through the silence—they belonged to her Past!—and the soul of this woman, hungering for her lost life, knew no passion but to destroy those who now dwelt in the paradise from whose gates the flaming sword of a pitiless vengeance had driven her forth to the desert. She stole on, shrouded by the fitful moonlight, till she found her way to a marble terrace, where some of the windows still stood open to the night; and, sheltered by the ilex shrubs, Marion Vavasour crept nearer and nearer, and gazed into Lucille's bridal home. Kneeling there, she could see the long vista of the lighted chambers, which had a few moments past been filled by the guests of the Cabinet Minister, a small, choice gathering, the roll of whose carriages still echoed through the still night that was stealing into the Sabbath dawn. The dank dews fell chill upon her brow, her limbs were stiff and weary, she had no clanship save with the great outcast multitudes,

whose name is legion and whose portion wretchedness; —and she gazed upon the light and luxury and beauty, the rich colouring and delicate hues, and gleaming marbles veiled in the warm clusters of countless blossoms, where what Strathmore loved, lived in his honour and his shelter, in the grace of earliest youth, and in the purples of grandest power.

A sickly and deadly envy shivered through her veins, and she stretched nearer and nearer, as the reared snake darts from out the shadow its hooded head and poisoned barb.

She, kneeling there without, saw Strathmore in the light within ;—and where he stood his head was bowed, while on the coldness of his face was that fond warmth which never came there save for one. They were alone, and Lucille leaned against him ; her arms were wound about his neck, and while his hand caressed the light wealth of her hair, her eyes looked upward into his with that love which was the holiest and fairest thing which had entered in with the ambitions, the passions, and the remorse, of an unscrupulous and erring life.

They were so near, that she who watched without, could see the look with which the eyes that had spoken their mute merciless doom to her when he had loosed her to the fury of the seas, gazed down on the young loveliness gathered to his bosom ; so near, that she could hear the voice which had bade her perish in the devouring waters, soften to more than woman's tenderness, in answer to the fond words whose happy murmur had filled the silence :

“ Ah ! if it were not to wish you less honoured and less great, I should wish we were always alone, and that Lucille never lost you to the world ?”

“ Lucille never loses me to the world, for never is she one hour from my thoughts, though the world claims my time and my presence.”

And as those answering words echoed on the stillness of the midnight to the ear of the hidden watcher without, she saw at last the single place in his armour of proof where, if one poisoned arrow ever pierced, the mailed and kingly life must reel and fall ; and a whisper hissed from her own blanched, fevered lips, “ He loves her—he loves her !”

Through the stillness there trembled the low sigh of that perfect joy which, like the hush of noon, is silenced by its own intensity, as Lucille looked upward to his face which, cold and changeless for all others, to her ever wore that gentle tenderness which, so long hers from her guardian, was a hundred-fold hers from her husband.

“ Ah ! how beautiful it is to live !” she murmured ; and the words of happiness which had never known even a dream of pain, of love which lent its own divinity to all existence, stole to the strained ear and thirsty hate of the woman with whom to live had been to sin, and who had but one seared and cruel passion left—the passion to destroy.

“ Thank God it is so for you, my darling !”

“ For *us* ?”

“ ‘ For us ’—yes. For me while for you.”

She nestled nearer to his heart, while her voice was still hushed in its deep dreamy sweetness.

“I wish there were no suffering for any? I cannot bear to think that there is so much pain on earth; can you? I saw a woman in want to-day; I wish you had been with me. Her face has haunted me ever since; it looked so *lost*, so full of evil, yet so full of weariness. Why is it that some faces look like that?”

“Do not seek to know, my child!—you could never even dream.”

“She grieved me, too,” pursued Lucille, while the light from above fell white and soft upon her where she leaned against him, her head resting on his breast, the pearls woven in her shining hair, the costly laces of her delicate dress trailing on the floor, with bright flowers flung here and there upon them. “She sat so haggard and so desolate by the river all alone. It must be so terrible to be *alone*! I thought the very poorest had some one to love them?”

“But she was left less desolate when you had seen her, Lucille?”

He knew that her nature had no pleasure greater than in giving rest and succour to all who were in need, and he let her spend his wealth as widely as she would in charity; every fair and gracious mercy traced to her, every blessing that fell on her from the lives she aided, rejoiced him.

“I am afraid nothing could help her very much,” she answered him, musingly, in the voice which had

become to him the sweetest music that earth held,—it was so full of joy! “She looked so longingly at my roses; they might have been the faces of familiar friends! I gave them to her, for I thought they might comfort her if she loved them as I do.”

Over his face passed a shadow of startled fear, of disquietude, heavy though nameless; he knew not why nor what he dreaded.

“Your roses! It was strange that a beggar cared for them, Lucille?”

“Why? Perhaps they recalled to her some happier past. Do you know I think—I fancy,—she is the same woman I saw ill at White Ladies, one of those who were shipwrecked, she whom you found me with, that day;—you remember?”

He shuddered, and drew her to him with a gesture of passionate tenderness.

“Do not speak to strange people, my darling,” he said, rapidly and uneasily. “You are too young to discern whom it is fitting you should notice. Let none, save those I sanction, ever have access to you.”

She raised her face, illumined with her tender and beautiful smile:

“Ah! I love to have anything to promise you and to obey you in!—I wish you gave me more, then you would know how Lucille loves you.”

He bowed his head, and kissed the lips which had so sweet an eloquence for him, and drew her with fond care from the breath of the night breeze as it swept through the opened casements; his frame, firm knit

as steel, and braced in his youth by desert heats and ocean storms, felt even the slight chillness in the summer wind, since it might have danger for the early life he cherished.

And she who watched without with burning, jealous eyes, while the darkness brooded over her hiding-place, where she crouched as a serpent coils beneath the leaves, saw him lead Lucille through the long vista of light and warmth, of renaissance hues, and tropic foliage, until their forms passed from her sight, and she heard the distant closing of a door falling behind them. Yet she knelt there still, sheltered by the leaves, and with her face looking out into the starlight, haggard and lit with a terrible baffled passionate desire, ravening for its prey ; knelt there until the light died out from the windows, and no sound stirred the silence but the gentle lulling of the river, and all was still in the hush of sleep.

The night was serene, the winding waters murmured in tranquil measure on their way, the stars shone down in holy solemn peace ; and as the poisonous snake steals, dark and noiseless, through the gentle night where none behold its pestilential trail, Marion Vavasour stole through the dark shelter of the leaves, looking backward, ever backward, to where were sleep, and rest, and soft dreams only stirred by as soft a caress, while like the death-hiss of the snake gliding to destroy, the whisper hissed from her set lips : “ He loves her !—he loves her ! ”

## CHAPTER XII.

“SUR L’AVENIR INSENSE QUI SE FIE ?”

THE light of a fire, made of wood of aloes brought from the East, and filling the air with its incense-like perfume, shed its flickering brightness over a room luxurious as any palace chamber in the Arabian Nights. Hangings of azure silk, arabesques of gold, rich-hued Guido heads, and delicate white carvings, art-trifles of rarest beauty, and flowers scattered in profusion everywhere, bright in hothouse blossom, were lit by the fire-gleam into such a mingled mass of colouring as artists would have worshipped in its chiaroscuro. Not less would they have loved the face on which the fire shed its glow; the thoughtful brow, the spiritual eyes, the lips on which was a dreaming smile. There was a light upon her face that had never been there, there was a perfection in

her loveliness that it had never before reached, as Lucille leant back in a low chair, gazing into the bright wood embers, while a large greyhound lay stretched at her feet, and the warm glow played upon her gold-flecked hair, in the twilight of the spring day which had grown chilly in the great squares of patriarchal West London, six months after her marriage.

She was alone, but her reverie was sweeter than the companionship of any save of one, and her thoughts were fairer dreamland than any poet's song or romancist's story could have told her. Joyous, and without even passing shade, as her caressed and guarded youth had been from the days of her earliest memory, it seemed to Lucille that she had never known happiness until now; now that she was his own, of his name, in his home, unsevered from him, and dear to him as no living thing had ever been.

It was growing very dusk, but the half-light, the uncertain lustre crossed and deepened by the shadows, suited her imaginative and meditative nature. Had her own life known a touch of twilight, she would have learnt to find the twilight hour unendurable; her days were full of sunlight, and she loved the weird poetic pause between the day and night.

Suddenly the greyhound rose with a deep bay, shaking his silver chain, Lucille lifted her head in eager listening gladness; a step they both knew echoed without, the door opened at the far end of the chamber, the portière was flung back, and Strathmore entered. In an instant she had crossed the vast

length of the apartment, and had thrown herself into his outstretched arms ; her face flushed with delight, her eyes gazing into his as though they had been parted not for hours but years.

“My darling ! my darling !” murmured Strathmore, as he bent over her ; and in his eyes as they looked down upon her it might be read that in that moment at least he was happy ; it might be seen how deeply this man could love, who, by a fatal error, had believed himself as cold, as he was, of a truth, inexorable.

He led her forward to where the fragrant aloes’ flame flung out its ruddy heat upon the hearth, and as he sank into a couch beside the fire, she threw herself down at his feet, resting her bright head against him, while his arm was still about her. For the first time in his life his home was sacred and welcome to Strathmore ; before, it had been to him but a residence in which to sleep, to dine rarely, save when he entertained the world, to keep the state and pomp requisite to his public position, and to give his ministerial banquets and receptions ; now it was dear to him, for it was also hers.

“What, you were all alone, my child, and in the twilight, too ?” he said, fondly, as his hand caressed her hair.

She looked up, while the firelight shone in her eyes and on the radiance of her face.

“I would always rather be alone when you are not with me. It is solitude without you wherever I am,

and if I am *quite* alone there is nothing to break my thoughts of you."

"Lucille! you should not love me so well."

She looked up, still with a smile which spoke beyond words.

"Love is all I have to pay you in. I cannot give too much."

"Pay *me*! I am the debtor."

Her caresses, her tenderness, her infinite devotion to him, were ever new, ever sweet to Strathmore; with any other he might probably have been satiated and wearied before now, with Lucille he was never tired of gazing on the fairness of her face, and he could never hear too many of her fond words. He had loved her ere he had wedded her, he had loved her far more since.

"As I said the other night, if it were not to wish you less great, I could wish we were always alone," she whispered him, while she lay at his feet, making a bright artistic picture with the greyhound at her side on the soft, rich-hued skins upon the hearth.

"I could wish, too, that I had never to leave you," he answered her, tenderly, his hand still wandering over the light gold of her hair. "Well, we will be alone for a time; there is nothing that needs me imperatively now, and we need not go to the Queen's ball till late. You shall have an hour or two to yourself, Lucille."

Her face beamed with delight.

"Ah, I am so glad! I feel how proud and glorious

it is to bear your name when I am with you in the world, but I love better still to be with you alone. Others are your companions as well *there*; but I am the only one who shares your solitude.”

He smiled; the intensity of her affection for him, too great in its usurpation of all her life and thoughts, never alarmed him, as it might well have done, for her: he only saw in it the fulness of her happiness through him, the completeness with which her happiness was merged in and dependent on him, and thus also in it the completeness of his atonement to her father. The cool and daring nature of Strathmore was not one to fear the fatal adversities of chance. Accident is chiefly dreaded by women; by men rarely, by Strathmore never. When the sin that he had sinned to Valdor for her swept over him with a remorse scarce ever lulled, he strove to thrust it aside; he would have taken fresh guilt to his soul to have spared Lucille one passing touch of the knowledge of sorrow.

Lucille leaned nearer against him, while a warmer flush rose to her cheeks.

“ There is something I want to ask you—may I ? ”

“ May you ! ” he repeated, with a smile. “ My own darling ! have you need to ask that ? What is there I ever refuse you, Lucille ? ”

“ Oh no, no ! Nothing that I could beg you to give or to do; but this is different—something I want to ask you of yourself.”

“ Of myself ? Say what you will, my love.”

He thought she alluded to political matters, for

Lucille's intelligent, and highly-cultured mind rendered her very far in advance of her actual years ; and all childlike, guileless, and poetic as her nature was, she embraced and entered into his career with a depth of comprehension and of sympathy which made her no unfitting companion of a politician's life.

“ I have never asked you before ; but I think you will tell me now—now that I am so near to you,” she said, softly, and half shyly, while the colour deepened in her face as she spoke the last words. Her reverence for her guardian had been so interwoven with her life, that it was still inseparably mingled with the fuller, freer, and still fonder tenderness she bore him as her husband. “ I want you to tell me”—and her voice sank very low, while her arm stole round his neck—“ to tell me of that cruel woman whom they say that you once loved ? ”

Strathmore started violently, as if a snake had stung him ; a look of terror and of horror glanced into his eyes. As the firelight shone upon his face and hers they were in strange contrast ; the one worn, pale, blanched with a great fear, and dark with all the memories of the past that flooded on him with that single question ; the other bright and fair in all the loveliness of earliest youth, its delicate colouring flushed, her violet eyes beaming, humid and eloquent, as her shining hair brushed his cheeks.

“ Of her ? —of *her* ? My 'God ! What do you know of her ? ”

In the passionate agitated words, to which a ghastly

dread gave the first sternness, the first harshness which had ever tinged his words to Lucille, the cool wisdom of the statesman was forgotten, the truth betrayed ; he had not remembered with what ease her question might have been eluded, her innocence blinded and misled.

Lucille looked at him ; her eyes startled and filled with wistful pain, her colour faded, her face full of self-reproach and sorrow. She saw that he was wounded—and by *her*!—and she heard in his voice the first accent of anger that had ever fallen on her ear. She did not know how far removed from anger, how far worse than his worst anger could have been, were the memory and the dread which gave his words their first and momentary severity. She threw herself on his heart with loving, broken whispers of regret and grief ; it was the first time pain had ever risen up between them—the first time she had ever known the misery of his displeasure.

“ Forgive me !—do forgive me ! I meant no harm ; I did not know ! Oh, for the world I would not grieve you ! ”

The tears that shone in her eyes, and quivered in her voice, recalled him to himself ; he shuddered—already must his accursed past fall on her, and bring sorrow to her even through him !

“ Lucille, my darling ! I have nothing to forgive. You have done no harm—*you* have not grieved me. You have asked me nothing but what you have a right to ask. It is only—only—For God’s sake

tell me what made you say that then—what made you speak of her?"

Lucille lifted her eyes to his, in which he read every thought, mirrored as in a glass.

"I only heard of her what Lady Chessville and Lady Castlemere said, long ago, last year at White Ladies; and—"

"I know, I know," broke in Strathmore, hastily, for his mother had told him of that conversation.  
"But why should you—"

"I could not tell you what made me think of her then; but I often do, because—because I have longed to ask you if it were true she was so dear to you, and if it is from any memory of her that you cannot bear the roses, and call them the flowers of sin? I longed to ask you if—if you regret her *now*, and if you loved her better than you love Lucille?"

Her voice shook a little in the last words, and her head was bowed on his breast as she whispered them; of restless jealousy, of evil curiosity, her radiant and ethereal life knew no taint nor shadow. But now and then she heard a sharp quick sigh from Strathmore; she saw a darkness come over his face when he thought her eyes were not upon him; she was awakened by restless murmured words in his broken sleep; and Lucille, who lived but for him, had wondered, dreamily, vaguely, as she had wondered when she had gazed out on the moonlit abbey-lands of White Ladies, whether the regret of that dead, nameless

passion, was still on *him*—had wondered who she had been, this traitress who had deserted him, yet whom he had perhaps never forgotten or replaced. In her true and childlike instinct she had not kept the fear by her in silence to brood over its pain; she had brought it at once to him.

She felt him shudder from head to foot, and his hand tremble as hers closed upon it. To speak of Marion Vavasour to *her*! and yet to the trustful innocence of Lucille he could not lie.

His voice was hoarse as he answered her, with a harsh impetuous passion vibrating in it that she had never heard there, yet which, like his violence on the sea-shore when she was a young child, she knew instinctively was not violent to her.

“ For the mercy of God, do not speak of her! I loved her—yes!—with such love as you cannot dream. Heaven forbid that you should! Let my past be!—my present is yours. My name, my home, my heart are yours; do not taint them with what is accursed, with what is unfit for your lips! ”

Lucille lifted her head, and looked up in his eyes with that gaze with which on the sea-shore she had looked at him in her infancy; her eyes were wistful, startled, but, beyond all else, full of a deep and yearning tenderness for *him*. Her lips quivered, her colour rose; his grief was hers, and his wrongs her own. She clung to him closely, her heart beating thick and fast.

“Was she so faithless to you, then—this wicked woman? Oh, how could any one whom *you* loved betray you!”

“For God’s sake, hush! Her name on your lips!”

The words were muttered in his teeth, as he rose hurriedly, putting her from him, and paced the length of the chamber, the twilight only broken into darker shadow by the warm flashing gleams of the fire which shot across it, hiding his face from her. It was agony to him, this torture of her innocent questions, of her fond sympathy, of her tender grief at his wrongs! His self-control was destroyed, his calmness and his strength shattered down, all the darkness of the tragedy hidden from her came back upon his memory, all the inexpiable brutality of his guilt towards Erroll seized him as in the first fresh hours when he had stood beside the bier where the dead man lay stretched in the summer sunlight, with Lucille’s unconscious words! He could not look upon her face while she spoke to him of the assassinatress of her father.

Unwitting of the blow she dealt him, she, who only knew that she had grieved him, and had called back to him some past that was bitter in its remembrance, sprang to him with the soft rapid flight of a bird, and threw herself again upon his heart.

“Forgive me! forgive me! I did not know that I should grieve you—I, who would give my life to spare you pain! I had no right to ask what you had not told me of yourself. I was wrong, very wrong.”

He pressed her closely to his bosom, her words of self-reproach seemed to him to heap coals of fire on his head. If she knew what that past was he “had not told her”!

“You asked nothing but what you had a right to ask,” he said once more, while his voice, like her own, was broken. “Leave me a moment, my own darling—a moment; I will speak to you then.”

Her eyes turned on him wistfully, beseechingly, but not to obey him never crossed the thoughts of Lucille; it was the unquestioning obedience, never of fear, wholly of love, which she rendered him. She left him as he bade her, and stood in the light of the fire with her head bowed on the white carved marble. Her face was very pale, the tears hung heavy on her lashes, her heart was touched with the first pang that she had known since the marriage-day which had given her to Strathmore. She thought how he must have loved this woman that her mere memory smote him thus, that for her sake alone he had shuddered at the mere scent and sight of the scarlet roses.

His step echoed on the silence of the chamber; the twilight shadows hid his face as he walked up and down for some minutes; then he approached her, and his features, while they were yet worn and weary, had recovered their serenity, and he drew her to him with his accustomed tenderness as he stooped and kissed her.

“My precious child, you have but asked what it is surely your due to know,” he said, gently and gravely,

with that perfect self-command which never, save for a few moments, deserted him. "You have a right to ask everything of me; I have a right to answer; and I rejoice at nothing more than that no thought even which passes through your mind should be concealed from me. Confide in me freely—never more so than when your doubts are of me."

Lucille lifted her head in eagerness, her cheeks flushed again, her eyes full of love.

"They were not doubts of *you*. How could I doubt you ever?—what could I doubt you in? It was only that I doubted—"

"What?" he said gently, as she hesitated.

"That—that," whispered Lucille, softly and swiftly, "that you have never loved me as you once loved *her*."

A quick shudder ran through him; but his self-control, freshly reconquered, was not lost again.

"You thought truly, Lucille," he said, gravely. "In you I love innocence—in her I loved guilt. Is there matter for envy for you, there, my guileless child, who cannot even dream what such guilt is?"

Lucille's face grew awed and wistful while the thoughtful shadow which was ever more or less upon it deepened, but a beautiful light shone in her eyes.

"Ah, then,—I am dearest to you?"

"God is my witness, yes—a thousand-fold! And now, while I acknowledge your right to ask of me what you will, I, too, would ask one thing of your love. The past is dead; when you bid me look on it, you bid me look back upon years that are accursed in

my memory.” His hand, as he spoke, trembled where it rested on her shoulder, but his voice was calm and sustained. “The history of my madness for—for her of whom you speak, I could not tell without such suffering as the opening of old and deadly wounds brings with it. I ask of you to spare me that. If you bid me endure it, I will; what you demand to know I will not refuse to answer; but you love me, Lucille—I think you will not force me to dwell on a past that can have no rivalry with you, a name that it would but pollute your innocence to learn. Am I wrong?”

“No, no! I will never ask you one word again!” she murmured, passionately. “*I bid you suffer!* Oh, my lord, my love, would Lucille be so little worthy you? I was wrong to say what I did. All I longed to know was that you loved me too well ever to regret another. I know it now—I want no other knowledge!”

Tears so rare in Strathmore’s eyes, rose in them as he heard her words. He had judged aright her tender, generous, and lofty nature; he had known the chord to strike to make her young heart vibrate and echo to his will, but it touched him to the soul; though from all love, though in all justness, he was still deceiving her, and his eyes were softened to a deep gratitude, as before some divine and holy thing, as he bowed his head, and let his lips rest on hers.

Thus that danger passed—passed, leaving no shadow

on Lucille's life. When once her fear was unfolded, it fled. She knew that she was alone in his heart; that knowledge, as she had said, was sufficient for her. He had wished his past unasked of; she banished even thought of it from a mind which best loved to mould itself by his law, and by his wish.

She was the incarnation of shadowless youth, fair as the dawn, in those hours which he had promised her they should spend alone, as she played, like the child she was, with the greyhound on the hearth, and sang in music like the gladness of a forest bird, and threw herself at Strathmore's feet, while the fragrant aloes' flame gleamed on her face, and she told him of a hundred poetic thoughts, and fairy fancies, and pure ambitions, that lived in him and saw in him the glory of their dreams. The evil of his past had touched, but glanced harmless off her, leaving no memory and no trail behind it. If her life could but be kept thus!

*If!*—vague, disquiet, nameless dread had fastened on him since those innocent questions, which had sought unwittingly to unveil the tragedy, whose truth, beheld by her, would be death, like the unveiled face of the Medusa. The past was on him, like a fixed and recurrent dream; and while the night brought Lucille sleep as light, as soft, as smiling in its dreams as the rest of infancy, his own thoughts, sleepless and wandering through the darkness of dead years, went ever to one memory alone—the memory of Marion Vavasour.

## CHAPTER XIII.

“ DIOS CONSIENTE, PERO NO PARA SIEMPRE.”

A SCORCHING noon burnt the vast sandy plains around Marseilles, and the great pine forests beyond Grataloup, and the blue glittering sea had no motion along the whole line of southern shore, from where the olive woods of Monaco sloped down to the waters in the east, to where the chesnuts and the vineyards of the Western Pyrenees were withered by the intense and cloudless sun. The heat was unbearable, rare even for the Midi, and it was most stifling, most pitiless, most hateful, in its blinding glare, and its burning, breathless oppression on the dreary stone bastions, and the stone-locked harbour of Toulon, where the galley-slaves of the Bagne were toiling under their burdens, and working in long files under the lash of their *gardes-chiormes*.

Hard, merciless labour, the toil of beasts of burden, dragging up the sloping planks the ponderous trucks

of building-stones, or panting, like horses overladen, under the chains by which they were fastened to the timber, or the iron, or the loads of gravel that they brought along the fortifications in the parching desert-heat. Toil, terrible and bitter to be borne to the limbs inured by every hardship, and to the sinews, coarse and strong as oak fibres, of the Auvergnat or the Nantais ; of the Cevennes charcoal-burner or the Paris felon, who had burrowed from birth with the rats in the Catacombs, and held his *fête* in the vile saturnalia of the Quartier de l'Enfer.

Toil, by the sweat of the brow, and to the uttermost limit of strength, to those begotten in wretchedness, born in misery, reared in starvation, and braced to hunger and to thirst, to outrage and to crime. But tortures that were like the protracted throes of one long living death to the hands that were soft as women's ; to the limbs that were enervated by luxury ; to the lives that were accustomed to every delicate indulgence ; to the pride that had never stooped to any living man, and now wore the fetters of the galley-chain as haughtily as it had worn the orders of a noble ; to those who were thrown with common felons, their only sin that they had chosen the losing side, and had been Patriots instead of Placemen, or in lieu of prudent and purchasable creeds, which could have altered with the wind, had chosen, in an unheroic age, the chivalrous code of a hopeless loyalty. The red shirt and *bonnet vert*, the coarse food they would in other days have seen their dogs turn from in disgust, the irons that

ate into their flesh, the nights of misery on their horrible beds, the ton weights under which the hardiest cattle would have broken down, the deadly labour under the long burning days—all these they shared with the common criminals of the land which they had only loved too well. And even these were mercy beside that fell companionship which lashed them side by side with the hideous pollutions of great cities, with the brute greed which had taken life for a copper coin, or a toss of brandy, with the vilest guilt and with the lowest vice that made manhood deformity and the world a hell.

One of these—waiting, as he had been waiting well-nigh for a year, deportation to Cayenne—manacled to a gaunt Liégois, who had been sent to the galleys for arson, was dragging a load of sand, fresh dug from the excavations, the ropes that fastened him to his burden cutting his flesh as his shafts cut a galled horse, the sun scorching to blisters his bared shoulders, the irons locked upon his ankle and his wrists, his taskmaster behind him to revenge each laggard step, each pause when in the heat he sickened and reeled under the weight, with a sharp scourge of the lash as to a disobedient hound.

Bound with criminals, and sunk lower than the dogs, stripped to the waist, and weighted with fetters, with his hair shorn away, and the sweat of an intolerable travail on his brow, the Aristocrat was still distinguishable from those with whom he was companioned; the hands which laboured with the pick-

axe and the spade no suns could brown, the neck round which the cord was passed that harnessed him to his truck no indignity could bow, the proud silence which every outrage, jibe, and blow tried beyond human endurance, no insult and no torture could break. Namelessly, strangely, but with a chasm of difference between them that no unity of suffering, of labour and of bondage could bridge over, the Noble stood out apart from the Criminals with whom he was condemned to herd; never made like them, never made one of them, by any outrage, by any misery. For all else than this, Raoul de Valdor would have been unrecognised, and passed as a stranger, by those who had known and loved him best, as he toiled here, a political *condamné* in the Bagne of Toulon.

A yacht had come into the Toulon harbour, driven there overnight by a tempest, and at anchor that glittering, sickening, torrid day; while not a breath stirred the drooping sails, not a touch of coolness came over the lake-like waste of the Mediterranean; not a cloud, ever so slight, broke the painful steel-blue glare of the hot skies.

The yacht had been wintering about the Morea and the Levant, idly and purposelessly, for to the young man who owned it it mattered little whether he were under the skies of the East or the West, beneath the shadow of Mount Ida, in the *Æ*gean, or of the frowning pine-crowned crags that overlook the Danube; for the glory was gone from his life, and he was in

those years which refuse to believe that although one sun has set to-day, another will rise with the morrow. He cared little where he went or what he did; and he strolled listlessly now through the Bagne, hearing little what was said by those who showed him over it, though his heart was stirred to a keen, unselfish pain as he saw the crime and the wretchedness locked in, in the vast stone jaws of that merciless trap. He, with liberty, youth, health, and “all the world before him where to choose,” felt that the grief which overshadowed his life because one desire of his heart had been forbidden him, was egotistic, rebellious, and unworthy of manhood, when he looked upon the hideous mass of crime, the intensity of human misery, the lives, loaded with fetters and labouring like beasts of burden, which were about him in the bastions of Toulon, doomed beyond escape until death should come and loose them from their chains.

“Good God! is that creature a man?” he said, as he pointed out a Caliban with the frame of a giant, but with a face so loathsome in its mastiff-like brutality and its low, dogged, sullen ferocity, that it well seemed to belong to those “lower beings beneath humanity,” which the Spaniards of Columbus, Ojeda, and Nicuesa, expected to find in the *Terra Nuova*.

“A Nantais, who cut his father and mother’s throats for a little matter of gold the old people hid in a pitcher,” answered his conductor, carelessly. “They found him guilty, with *circonstances exténuantes*.”

“What in Heaven’s name could they be?” asked

the young Englishman, as he moved hurriedly with an uncontrollable horror from the place where the parricide was.

The other shrugged his shoulders :

“ *Une phrase de paille, monsieur !* We do not love capital punishment. The executioner is your pet across the Channel ; he is not so with us.”

The young man was silent, his blue eyes ranging thoughtfully over the droves of men chained together for such incongruous causes, for such disproportioned crimes. Something of that profound melancholy and despair which comes over men of great minds when they reflect on the complexity, the vastness, and the diverseness of evil, and see no way which can sever justice from cruelty, or ally mercy with necessary vigour in the law, weighed even on his naturally careless, unmeditative temperament. His gaze rested on the face and form of the Parisian Noble, as he laboured along the plank with his truck-load of gravel. Lionel Caryll had known him well ; scarce twelve months before they had spent months together at Silver-rest and at White Ladies, but his eyes looked on him without recognition, so utterly was Valdor dead in the Galley-Slave of the Bagne. Yet that nameless air, that look of “ blood ” which still lingered, attracted Caryll ; he gazed at him long and with compassion.

“ *He* has committed no crime ! ” he said, involuntarily.

“He has committed the worst, monsieur,” said his guide, laconically.

“Impossible!” broke in the young man, with that frank impulse natural to him. “What is he accused of that such a man can be here, with common felons, with assassins, and with parricides?”

His conductor stroked his moustaches, and smiled amusedly; he had seen many such men there, seen them live and die there.

“That one conspired against the government.”

“What! For a mere political difference of opinion; for a——”

“Chut, monsieur!” said the polite but prudential functionary, with a smile, “that is not the way we talk in France.”

“May I speak to him?” asked Nello, attracted by the pale, proud, weary, yet unconquered look of the *condamné*.

His companion hesitated:

“Yes, monsieur, if you wish it,” he said, after a pause.

It was out of rule, but he was himself a considerable person in the Bagne, who could accord such liberties without suspicion or correction, and he knew that the young Englishman was highly connected with several houses of the British aristocracy. There could be no danger, and he called the prisoner to him roughly and imperiously, as he would have called a dog.

“Don’t do that, I will go to him,” said Nello,

quickly, wounded, half with anger, half with pain, as he felt, almost with a personal mortification, the harsh shout of the callous custodian to the man whose single crime had been that patriotism which, deified by us as we read the pages of classic history, is damned by us in our own day, if shaped in other form to that in which we choose to mould it for ourselves.

As he moved, Valdor obeyed the command, the Liégois incendiary, with whom he was coupled, following him perforce ; obeyed, as one too proud for a petty and a vain resistance, and of too knightly a nature to show that the miserable outrages of an inferior's tyranny had power to sting or gall him. But the blood had risen to his hollow cheek, and his head was lifted with a certain grandeur as he approached his taskmaster ; the man was great in his fallen might, in his captive's fetters, as he had never been in the days of his rank and his brilliance. There is a majesty in Adversity, though it is a king to whose purples the mocking multitudes will not bow down ; for the world worships and censes only the sovereign which it calls Success, even though oftentimes its crown is tinsel, its path is infamy, and its treasures are theft.

As he drew nearer, his eyes fell on Lionel Caryll, the colour deepened in his face, and a look of terrible pain came into his eyes. The last time he had seen the youth had been the night when he had believed that Lucille loved him.

Nello, with the chivalrous courtesy to misfortune of high breeding and of a gentle nature combined, lifted his hat, and bowed with a smile as engaging as he would have given to the proudest potentate in Europe, and with a deep respectful pity spoken in his glance, while the Bagne official stood by smiling in his sleeve, and thinking, “What eccentric animals they always are, these English! *Saluer un forçat! Bah!*”

“Monsieur,” he began, hesitatingly, “pardon me that I have taken the liberty of asking to speak with you. I am an Englishman, Lionel Caryll, and if I could have the honour to serve you in any way——”

“Lionel Caryll! and you do not know me!” said the *condamné*, with a smile of such resigned melancholy that it pierced to the heart of the young man.

“Know you?” he echoed, wonderingly, while his eyes dwelt on the haggard, wasted features, the weary, lustreless eyes, and the browned gaunt face, shorn of beard and hair, of the *forçat* before him. And as he looked, slowly and incredulously, remembrance and recognition returned on him, he grew pale as death, and recoiled in horror.

“Valdor! Merciful Heaven!”

“Even I!”

There was an intense pathos in the simple words in which the late brilliant and chivalric Noble acknowledged his identity with the prisoner of the *Travaux Forcés*, in whom the friends of his lost life could find no trace by which to know him!

“Gracious God! how came you here?” murmured Caryll, while his voice shook with emotion, and the dank dew gathered on his forehead in the shock with which his youthful and fervid nature was struck at meeting the man whom he had known and feared as a dazzling courtier and a powerful rival, now weighted with irons, and leashed with a criminal in the convict works of Toulon.

“I suffered for my cause. Many better men than I have done as much, and more,” answered Valdor, briefly.

If he knew that one whose hand was without mercy to strike, and whom in one mad hour he had threatened when the haughty soul of Strathmore was flung down before him in the humility of supplication, had been that which, unseen and indirectly, but none the less surely, had sent him to his doom, Valdor was not made of that nature which could have told this to Strathmore’s young kinsman.

Nello gazed at him blankly, and with a paralysed horror still; it seemed but yesterday that he had envied this man all his versatile fascinations, all his courtier’s graces, as they were together, where they gathered round Lucille in the lighted drawing-rooms, or shot over the deer park, or rode through the forest aisles of White Ladies. And now they met here in the white blinding glare and the stone-locked prisons of Southern France!

It was very terrible to the warm young heart of Lionel Caryll, whose sympathies were all quick, and

whose compassion had not been worn away by the constant claims upon it which years bring with them. He could have shed tears like a woman at the sight of the man before him, while all his English blood was up in hot revolt at the tyranny which bound the political offender in the same brutality of chastisement as was incurred by the vilest criminals, by the fratricide, the incendiary, the poisoner, and the assassin.

“Merciful God!” he cried, passionately, “can such things be? What! only because you held to the creed of your ancestors, and wished to win back for your King his legitimate throne, the country that was once ruled by Henri Quatre flings you here with the vilest criminals upon earth!”

Valdor gave him a swift glance, which counselled him to hold back his indignant protest, for the overseer of the Travaux Forcés was looking suspiciously at the young man’s flushed face, and heard all the fiery words, as Nello spoke in French.

“*Dios consiente, pero no para siempre*,” he answered, in the Spanish proverb, with a mournful and restrained dignity, which perhaps, more than anything else, showed how captivity and degradation had worn away the hot impulsiveness and the brilliant insouciance of the French Noble, while at the same time they had brought out in him a grandeur which had not been there in the days of his fashion and his fortune.

“God’s vengeance should fall here, then!” mut-

tered Caryll, in his teeth, too ardent and too full of impulse himself wholly to obey Valdor's sign, though he had seen and rapidly comprehended it. "How long are you sentenced to this iniquitous, accursed misery?"

"For life. I am one of the *déportés* for Cayenne."

"Cayenne! Why, it is death itself, they say, those pestilential swamps! Is there no hope possible?"

"Hope does not enter here," said Valdor, with a smile more unutterably sad than the most bitter lamentations could ever have been.

The young man ground his heel into the hot sand on which they stood with a mute passionate gesture; he was by nature generous, sympathetic, and ready to do battle for any wrong, however foreign to him, and the constant action of Lucille's mind upon his own had lent him some of her unselfish and fervent pity for those who suffered.

Valdor looked at him, and even on his sunburnt face the blood rose as he leaned forward for the moment, forgetting that he was in chains.

"Tell me," he said, hurriedly. "Tidings of the world never reach here more than they reach the dead in their tombs! What of Strathmore?—of—"

Caryll knew the name before which he paused. With the rapid instinct of a lover, he had seen that Valdor also loved her, though of what had passed

that night under the palms he had known nothing. His heel ground the sand under it with a fiercer force than before, his eyes fell, he half turned away.

"My uncle has wedded Lucille," he said, briefly; and, while he uttered the words, all the anguish which that marriage had cost him in its first hours tightened afresh about him: he forgot the Bagne of Toulon; he forgot the men before him, and the stone walls around him; he only remembered the love of his youth.

Valdor answered nothing; he had known well enough what the answer would be, though perhaps, as with us all, until certainty fell like the axe of the headsman, he had, without knowing it, hoped against hope. He was silent; he had learnt of late to endure; but a grey pallor overspread the dark bronze of his face, and the heavy iron fetters that bound him to the Liégois criminal shook against each other as though struck together by a sudden blow.

"Is she happy?" said Valdor, after a long silence, while his voice was very low. The thoughts which were passing within him were little dreamed by the young man beside him—thoughts of the dark tragedy which had ushered in and still overhung the life of Lucille.

Nello's face was still half turned away, and was flushed with the keen pain which the subject brought him. He answered, however, with frank truth, as it was his nature to do, and moreover, since the night in which he had seen Strathmore's coldness broken

and his pride levelled by the community of suffering, he had felt to him as he had never done before.

“ Happy? Yes. At least they tell me so; I have not seen her since—since before her marriage, but I know how great her love was for my uncle, and that he would give his life to spare her a moment’s pain.”

“ He is so dear to her?” asked Valdor. The chains he bore, the misery he endured from one dawn to another, the sentence which devoted his whole life to a fate beside which the Noble’s death upon the scaffold had been mercy, were scarce so bitter to him as that question, for what he loved and had for ever lost, was in the instant of its asking.

“ Her life is centred in his,” answered the young man in his teeth, for he had not yet learned to speak calmly of what had struck him a blow that for the time had withered all the beauty of his youth. “ If harm befel him to-morrow, I believe it would be Lucille’s death.”

Valdor was silent, his head drooped, his lips grew very white where he stood, while the massive irons that linked him to the Liégois trembled as they hung from his wrists. Gazing down upon the yellow glare of the sand, he thought how wide and fearful a vengeance was in his hands upon the man who had consigned him here if liberty alone were his! Liberty! He shuddered as the word merely passed, mute and colourless, through his mind; its very memory was mockery, whilst around him were the white inexorable

walls, the galley-gangs, the fettered criminals of the Toulon Bagné.

The overseer, tired of the conference, and afraid of allowing a foreign visitor longer intercourse with one of the *galériens*, broke in, turning to Caryll :

“Monsieur, it is out of rule for a stranger to speak with a *forçat*! I can permit the interview to last no longer. *Au travail numéro six cent quarante-cinque!* *Va-t-en donc animal; vite!*”

Passionate words of rebuke, remonstrance, and unavailing wrath, rushed to Caryll’s lips, while his blue eyes flashed with longing to seize the official in the strong grip of his right hand, and hurl him down into the midst of the excavations beside which he stood. But a meaning, warning glance from Valdor arrested him, as he whose whole individuality was lost in “*numéro six cent quarante-cinque*” bowed with his old grace, and with that majesty which calamity nobly borne ever confers.

“M. Caryll, I thank you from my soul. The sight of your face has been like water in a desert to one who is shut in a living grave, and to whom the world is dead.”

Then, without resistance, or without sign that he had even heard the brutal voice of his taskmaster, he moved away to the plank where his labour awaited him. Swift as thought, Nello followed him with eager words of pity, sympathy, and indignant grief; but a hundred lynx eyes were on them, and the

glance of Valdor mutely warned him, as he would serve him, to fall back with those generous but rash words unuttered, while from his own lips a single phrase was whispered, so low that the young man could barely catch it: “*Doucement!—et conciliez Lavigne!*” Lavigne was the government employé who was conducting Nello over the Bagne.

His senses, quickened by the keenness of sympathy, and by the desire which Valdor had divined, to serve in some way, though he had no knowledge how, the man whom he had suddenly found in such terrible captivity, Nello caught the cue rapidly, though vaguely; he fell back, letting Valdor and Liégois return to their toil, and turned to the official with as much carelessness and courtesy as he, no good hand at diplomacy and deception, could assume on the instant. He accounted to Lavigne for having known the political offender by his having met him at his uncle’s house. Strathmore’s name was too familiar in France not to be well known even to the Toulon officer, and was in a great measure a voucher to him that no harm could result from the young Englishman’s recognition of “*Numéro six cent quarante-cinque;*” and Nello obeyed, as far as he could bring himself to do, Valdor’s whispered injunction, “*Conciliez Lavigne,*” by entering with apparent interest into the official’s explanations of the working and the regulations of the Bagne, and by inviting him to the inspection of his yacht, and to luncheon there on board with him. Most surely Caryll, with not a

little of the pride of his family in him, with an honest hatred of wrong and a heart sick at the tyranny to which he was witness, had never so stooped, but that a warm, eager, indefinite longing was already on him to loosen by some means or other those cruel fetters with which a man innocent of all crime, save a mistaken cause and a quixotic loyalty, was flung amongst thieves, bondsmen, and assassins.

When he had quitted the *Bagne*, and sat at evening on his yacht-deck, seeing the sun go down in all its golden glory in the Mediterranean waters, and musing on the mass of misery and guilt where the galley-slaves, when night closed in, would lie down manacled and side by side, in worse beds than kennelled dogs, the young man's thoughts revolved incessantly and restlessly round a thousand vague, wild, chivalrous, impossible plans for Valdor's rescue. He could see no way to it that was feasible; he could devise no scheme, however rash and reckless, that it was possible to obtain a chance to put in execution, but his nature was sanguine, his heart was generous, and he came of a bold race, who let nothing daunt them or oppose them.

Strathmore, in England, little dreamed the projects that floated through his young nephew's mind, till they settled into a matured and resolute will to liberate the condemned man, if daring or skill could find any means to do so, as he leaned over the side of his vessel looking at the stone bastions of Toulon, where they glared red in the ruddy sunset light. How,

when, at what risk, and by what measures he could not tell ; but to free the French noble was as resolved in the youth's heart as though the Eumenides of Greek fable had place and sovereignty in human life, and had appointed him the chosen instrument by which the evil which had been deliberately wrought should recoil on the life that had begotten it.

When the sun had sunk and the stars had come out, he still leaned there, looking down on the phosphorescent water, musing on this thing ; while in the Bagne of Toulon the prisoner, lying in the cramped misery which makes sleep torture, and denies even the merciful oblivion of slumber, and the restoration of lost joys which dreams may bring with them, thought of Lucille gathered to her husband's heart,—thought of the vast and awful vengeance which was his upon Strathmore *if—if* he had but LIBERTY !

And the yacht stayed off Toulon.

## CHAPTER XIV.

## THE SYMBOL OF THE DYING FLOWER.

SUMMER in the heart of the great city—mockery of the name! Summer! with the incessant roll of traffic, never ending from the dawn of one day to the dawn of another; with the loud beating of steam-presses throbbing and thundering through the nights; with the glory of the skies in azure warmth or starry stillness, shut out from sight by the great wilderness of roofs; with the dense heat of the noon burning on arid pavement, on whirling dust, on grey, gritty, barren walls; with the brightness of the sun shining on toiling crowds, on panting horses, on thronged narrow thoroughfares filled with noise, with stench, with reeking heavy heat; on dark, noisome courts, where, when its rays steal in through some broken chink or loosened shutter, they find men labouring and lustng for gold, with their eyes blind to the day and their souls lost to heaven. Summer! with the

only bird a prisoned lark in some garret window, that shakes its dust-covered wings and strains its parched throat in song that is but a long quiver of agony, while its beak plunges into the dry sear sod as though in some wild memory of the fresh woodland grasses far away. Summer ! with the only flower a sickly drooped plant, whose leaves hang lifeless, and whose blossoms are colourless with smoke ; with the only living water the ink-black, poisonous river, forest-thick with masts ; with the only murmur through the day and night the toiling of the weary feet of crowds who have forgotten what green fields are like.

Summer !—it is a terrible and ghastly thing in the pent alleys of a great city, and Marion Vavasour, when she stood leaning her arms on the sill of her narrow window, and gazing down into the noxious street below, sickened at it as under a physical torture. Beauty, colouring, poetry, luxury, they were the life of this woman's life ; her eyes longed, her heart thirsted for them, as the lark's for the woodland shadows, as the flower for the light of the sun and the sweetness of the morning dew. Years of evil and of infamy could not trample this out of her nature ; she had been born for all the luxuriance of power, all the delicate lustre of sight, and scent, and touch, and ever-changing scenes, which are the prerogatives of wealth ; she lived in *them*, without them she perished famine-stricken. The heat, the noise, the dusty glare, the barren, vulgar hideousness of the life about her were bitter torture to her, the death to which she had

sunk in the whirling ocean had not been one tithe so accursed to her, as the living death in which she dwelt. Proud, she was steeped to the lips in degradation ; a poetic voluptuary, her life was sheared barren of every memory of beauty ; once a patrician and a ruler, she lived now a pariah imprisoned in want and misery. Vengeance could not have been more subtle and complete.

Where she looked down into the hot, vile unsightly street, with its crowded wretchedness, and its narrow strip of sunny sky left between the high pent roofs as though in mockery of all the glorious world beyond, laughing in loveliness and light, that was lost and unknown to those who were dwellers here, her thoughts wandered to her dead and golden past.

The hours of triumphs, the homage of courts, the rich perfection of her peerless loveliness, the days of her glad and splendid sovereignty, they floated before her in memories tangled and lustrous like the glories of a dream. A thousand summer days, a thousand summer nights, the perfume of Southern climes, and the fragrance of luminous seas flashing in phosphor light, whilst the air was balmy with flowers, and filled with music from palace-stairs, gleaming marble white through deep odorous thickets of myrtle. The murmur of love-words whispered low, and the radiance of her own resistless beauty, with the gold light on her hair, and the proud challenge in her eyes, and the throngs of princes and of courtiers waiting on her steps, that swept like Cleopatra's over rose-strewn

paths :—they drifted past her, the phantoms of dead years, and a dull, sickly sense of unreality stole on her, looking on that glorious sun-lighted, diamond-crowned vision of her youth.

Had hers ever been this fair and sovereign life ? Was she what the world had known as Marion Vavasour ? The soft grace, the rich lustre, the divine fragrance of that bygone life, were they all dead for ever ? Could the light never come back to her eyes, the laughter to her heart, the beauty—her loved, lost beauty !—to her face, for which men had deemed the world well lost ?

And the ceaseless ebb and flow of the black river-tide, and of the surging throng in the weary glare below, seemed to beat as answer on the stifling air,

“ For ever, never ! Never, for ever !”

Yet among the living, as though condemned ghost-like to wander without rest among the world that knew her not, and in which she had no place, Marion Vavasour was dead !

She gazed down into the colourless dust-strewn street, while the air was filled with stifling odours from which she shrank, and up from the river swept pestilential vapours in the arid noon, in which the pale leaves of the garret-flower drooped, and the caged lark sat huddled and blind, with wings that hung nerveless, and a little life without song. And, as she gazed, through the weariness of her beggared years, one human passion rose, still sweet, still un-

exhausted, still the right and the lust of the outcast as of the monarch—the passion of revenge.

The hatred which had destroyed her, was scarce so cruel and so pitiless as the hatred that she bore; for men at their worst never reach the depths to which a woman sinks when once unsexed, and cast into the fathomless sea of unlicensed evil; the tigress is more cruel than her mate. Men strike at what they hate; women, more subtle and more merciless, strike at what is best-beloved by the life they would destroy. It is the difference of the sexes; one tramples out under an iron heel, the other poisons unseen and with a smile.

Vague, shapeless, hopeless, her vengeance rose before her sight; she knew now where to strike—but how?

Sunk amongst the lowest, destitute, and banned from every household, how could she sever two lives lifted far above her in the security of rank, and power, and peace? How could she learn the force to forge a bolt to reach and pierce the kingly mail of the patrician and the statesman? She had seen where the single weakness lay in the steel-clad strength of the man who had denied her mercy; but her hands were empty, she had no weapon with which to strike. All that brutality could have compassed, all that a serpent subtlety and an insatiate thirst could have schemed and been slaked in, she would have done; but her power was paralysed, whilst her passion to destroy burned but the fiercer for its impotence.

“He loves her!—he loves her!” the words that had been hissed from her lips in the night stillness as she had looked on them, broke from them now, as though in them she felt the whole measure of her hate were gathered, as though in them lay the mystical incantation at whose summons vengeance would rise incarnate, to be her minister and slave. She hated Lucille as that which is evil ever hates what is pure; the compassion which had pitied her, the sweet graciousness with which the young girl had smiled on her and offered her her roses, were but memories which made her savage greed the thirstier to destroy her.

She knew nothing of her save what rumour, floating to her as rumour floats amongst the masses of those above them, told; that she was a young, high-born girl, of whom many idle stories wandered downward through the ranks of society, till even the lowest caught and retailed them, touching her gentleness to all who suffered or sought charity, and her husband’s devotion to her, rumour’s hundred tongues outlying one another in what they babbled of the beauty, the luxury, the brilliance with which it was his pleasure to surround her, and of the idolatry in which he was said to hold one whom he had wedded when the world had deemed him bound solely to power and ambition.

This was all she knew; but it was more than enough to overfill the measure of a deadly hate, sole lingering passion of a ruined and ruthless life, which, driven out itself from every fairer and every

holier thing, loathed and panted to destroy all beauty that lived in another, all light that shone on other lives.

Strathmore had been her slave; in his passion, in his crime, *she* had been his temptress, even as she had been his destroyer; and a burning, poisonous jealousy consumed her, twisted in with the lust for her vengeance. She hated him with a hate unutterable; but a thrill of thirsty *envy* ran through her when she knew that this young and graceful loveliness was in his home, in his heart, in his life.

If the vain and sensual nature of Marion Vavasour had ever loved, she had loved—for a brief while—the man whose mad devotion had been lavished on her in that imperious force which wakes the heart of women in their own despite; the cruel tyrant had valued most the costliest toy she most utterly, most brutally destroyed; the sweetest, richest hours of her rich, sweet past had been those in which Strathmore had lain subject at her feet. She had believed that love was for ever dead in him, and rightly; the feeling which he bore to Lucille was too pure to bring the passion he had known once, and once alone. But this *she* did not know; she only knew that in another lay the joy of his life; that to another was given his kiss, his thoughts, his riches and his tenderness. And the poison of a fierce and brutal jealousy was in her—the jealousy of a woman who hates, and who has lost all that makes womanhood human.

“He loves her!—he loves her!”

The thirsty words were on her lips as she leaned out, looking on the heavy, sultry street ; in them she seemed to feel the prophecy and surety of her vengeance. Yet how touch those who dwelt as far above her now as the skies were above the wretched companions of her infamy ? How, with the impotent hate of an outcast, reach and sever the lives surrounded with the might and the purple of power ?

The serpent is powerless as the dove to harm, unless it can wind its way in to wreath around and breathe its venom on the life it would destroy. She had the will, the thirst, the passion to strike, and to strike without pity ; but her hands were empty. It was hopeless.

Where she leaned, the flower on the pent, dark casement was blown by the wind against her lips ; she shuddered from its touch ; she thought of the rose—rich, fragrant, dew-laden—that she had drawn from its leafy nest of foliage on the terrace at Vernonœaux. As that scarlet, odorous rose, had been her life in the Past,—like that withered, prisoned flower in the closeness of the sunless, noxious garret, was her life in the Present ! The poetry which still lingered in this woman's nature made her lean over the yellow faded leaves drooping there in the sicken-ing air, and see in them companions to her fate, and caress them with a weary hand—the hand that once dealt life or death at pleasure, and was touched with as reverent a kiss of homage as that which queens

receive. Susceptible, impressionable still, a thrill of terrible joy ran through her, as at some symbol and metaphor of vengeance, sure, if slow, as she saw gnawing at its roots the poisonous fungi—they were to her an omen and an augury.

“Ah!” she whispered to the flower, with the graceful, imaginative fancy which once had been her softest charm, now warped, usurped, and darkened, and made evil like herself, “they have shorn you of beauty, of fragrance, of glory, of life. No sun shines on you, and none think you fair. You are dead, and the world will give you no place—but you hold what will poison still!”

“Was any one ever so happy as you make me?” Lucille asked him, with a sigh of joy, as she leaned against him, in the lateness of that night, looking upward at the stars, while there stretched below the casement, the winding waters and the dark woodlands of the home that had been her bridal gift. She did not know why, for all answer, he pressed her closer to his heart.

“Thank God!”

“And you!” she murmured, while her eyes looked upward into his, “with all the glory and the greatness of your life, you never forgot Lucille.”

“When I forget Lucille, my life will have ceased!”

His head was bowed over her, and his voice was sunk to that deep tenderness which changed so utterly

the chill languor of its habitual tone, and was never heard save by her. She was an exquisite child to him still, with all her soft caprices, her poetic earnestness, her fairy fancies that were law to him, her unsullied innocence that was hallowed to him, and only became tenfold the fairer, tenfold the fonder, to his sight and to his heart through the changed ties which made her young life one with his.

The keenest remorse sleeps often and long, as the deadliest serpent lies dulled, and still, in peace through many hours; and in the happiness of Lucille almost he found his own, for in her he saw his atonement and his expiation.

She lifted her head with a fond caress;—those kisses of Lucille's lips seemed to purify his own; remembering them, callous words had not seldom been checked, a pitiless sneer not seldom been foregone. He strove—as far as his nature could—to be what she believed him.

“How beautiful the night is! The day smiles on us, but the night always seems fullest of God's love and pity?” she said, while her eyes gazed up to the still starlit skies with that meditative love of nature which beheld “God in all things,” and found poems in all, from the lowliest flower to the darkest storm.

He smiled tenderly on her;—to comprehend this was not possible to him; in his youth he had never known it, in his mature years it was yet farther from him; but in her it was sacred to him from disdain, safe even from a jest.

“ You see beauty in all the world, Lucille! If these chill, lustreless nights of England are so lovely to you, what will the Southern ones be—the nights of Baiae, of Sicily, of Greece?”

Where they leant against the balcony in the moonlight, he spoke of all to which he would take her some leisure time, when the pressure of office should relax and leave him free; of hours on the Mediterranean, where the lateen-boats were filled with fragrant freights of violets or olive-wood; of luminous waters, with the golden orange fruit and purple grapes hanging above the waves; of nights in the Carnival time, when from some lofty casement she would look out on the Roman throng and on the dome of St. Peter’s, studded and circled with light; of moonlit evenings, floating down the soft, grey Bosphorus, with each stroke of the oars leaving a trail of phosphor gold, and the snows of Mount Olympus towering in the lustrous radiance of the stars. Of scenes and hours which he drew from the memories of a long life, accomplished eloquence and facile words supplying that poetic temper which, so vivid in her, had never, even in youth, existed in him, so that its absence could not strike coldly or harshly on her, as she listened to the mellow music of his voice, and the graphic painting of his words, and let her thoughts float over the golden glories which steeped that rich dreamland, her future.

And in such hours as this—letting memory drift from him, and the fevered ambitions and bitter con-

tests of his world be forgot, while his thoughts and his words took their colour from hers—Strathmore himself was *almost* happy. “Almost”—for the great lost soul of the man could never wholly cast aside the burden of its sin; and the light of his life, that “light which never was on land or sea,” had died for ever for him when Marion Vavasour had betrayed him, and Erroll had fallen by his hand.

## CHAPTER XV.

## QUÆSTORES PARICIDII.

IT was far past midnight in Westminster, and as the Minister, whose sweeping and polished eloquence withered like an ice-blast all it smote, passed out from the House, after a great field-night, the approaches were hemmed in by a crowd breathless to see and eager to welcome him. Successful, but never popular; firm rooted in the confidence, but holding no place in the love, of the nation; wondered at, but scarce understood, in a country which deifies the Common-place, and calls its best Man of Business its best Statesman, the subtle and profound intellect of Strathmore was little comprehended; his genius was state-craft, his aspiration absolute dominance; born to rule, to command, and hold an undisputed sceptre, he was as little capable, at heart, of sympathy with the English nation, as the English nation with him. Solely beneath his sway,

they would have been ruled with the steel of a Sulla at home, but they would have never been degraded and ridiculed abroad. The hand of the tyrant might have been iron, but it would have grasped a sword never to be bribed into its sheath by an appeal to a trader's instincts.

Thus, England had little comprehension of him, and as little love; but the spirit of his policy was essentially the spirit which ennobles the blood of a country, and gives her the fear of her foes and the faith of her allies; and although this is the spirit which of all others is most lacking in the politics of the nation, and is deemed by her most costly and "idealistic," there are hours, now and then, when the blood stagnant in her veins is roused by it, as the war-horse which has long worn the girths of the huckster's saddle, and borne the trader's pack, still rouses to the trumpet-blast of the charge, and scents the battle afar off with eager, restless memories of glory gone.

This night had been one of them, and for once the old grand temper was awake in the country, and it recognised its exponent in the man, who, if his hand were iron, would at least uphold with it the might of England, and not put it behind him for the gold of a shopkeeper's bribe, to be slipped into the closed palm.

As he passed out into the night the crowds pressed closer and closer, and cheered him to the echo: that night in the autumn of the bygone year, when he had

given his life to the peril of the seas for the sheer sake of those perishing in the storm, had brought his name home to the hearts of the people with a warm human sympathy, which the aristocratic exclusivism and the rapid brilliance of his career had banished, rather than won. It had made his name loved by thousands whose eyes had never rested on him, and whose lives could render his no comprehension. It was in the hearts of the people now, and they were stirred as by one impulse; their shouts of welcome echoed to the night, roused by something higher than the trading interest, nobler than mere popular clamour; it was homage given, unbought and unbidden, to that which was loftiest, truest, grandest in Strathmore's nature.

For the moment he was moved to something holier than mere lust of power, to something warmer than the mailed pride of ambition, as he bent his head to the assembled multitudes; it was not the patrician who acknowledged the acclamation of the populace, it was the man who recognised the sympathy of his brethren.

He sank back in the solitude of his carriage, with a new and softened light within his eyes, and a weary sigh of rest after conflict.

He had done evil, but he had done also good—good, he hoped, wide, lasting, wrought for his country and for the sake of millions, who yet lay in the womb of the future. Might not this suffice to wash out the blood-stain on his life?

Scattering the people clustered in the narrow ways, the carriage moved forward in the clear light of the summer moon. The cheers rose deafening on the air; the masses swayed and surged in the fitful shadows; the great stone piles pealed back in echo the name the multitude hurled in honour to the starlit skies—“STRATHMORE! STRATHMORE!”

As the waves of a sea part and roll back, so the waves of human life swept aside with their mighty murmur, and, as it had risen from the sea-depths, with all its lost and evil beauty, known through all the change of years and ravages of a dishonoured life, so there rose to his sight, from the waving crowds and flickering shades of night, the face of Marion Vavasour. For a moment seen, and in a moment lost. Yet *in* that moment they had looked on one another, and an eternity could have told neither more.

The new and better light died out from Strathmore's eyes; a great anguish tightened about him; a dread, such as had seized him when he had seen her face in the yellow autumn mists of White Ladies, clenched upon his life, withering all hope, all peace, all future unborn years. The temptress and companion of his sin was that sin's avenger.

“Atonement!” The lurid cruel eyes of the woman for whose beauty he had steeped his soul in guilt, mocked at it, and drove him out from rest, as the Furies drove Orestes, even when remorse had brought

him weary, and worn, and sick unto death, to lie, if but for one brief hour, at the foot of the altars of God.

It was long past midnight.

His face was haggard, and his step had changed from its firm and stately tread to one slow and weary, as he passed through the halls and corridors of his ministerial residence, through the glow of white light, rich hues, delicate marbles, and clustering foliage. He had come from a proud success, with which Europe would teem on the morrow; he had come from the homage of the peoples, rendered as by one voice to him as the upholder of the honour of their nation. Yet it was not as a victor that he returned, and had the world beheld him in his solitude, it would not have found one memory of its triumph remaining with the man who, but a few seconds before, had spoken in the name of England the grand challenge which would uplift her ancient fame in the sight of a listening world, and who now came, as the guilty come into the presence of the innocent, with the knowledge and the burden of a dead sin alone with him, and upon him.

He passed through the silent chambers into Lucille's, where the aromatic silvery lamplight was soft and shaded, burning low.

Early in the evening he had returned with her from a state gathering, and had bidden her go to her rest; for used to the child-like simplicity and even tenor of

her years at Silver-rest, she was too young to be much in the restless vortex of that great world, of which her loveliness and his name had made her at once a queen —a queen as guileless and unconscious in her child-sovereignty now, as when her crown was of the woodland violets, and her wealth of the ocean shells, by the sea-shore at Silver-rest.

She had obeyed him ; she had no will save his, the gentlest guide, the surest guardian her life could ever have owned, since he had bent the iron of his nature like a reed, and changed his very character, until all its coldness, egotism, and ascetic indifference to all which weaker men hold dear, were lost in tenderness for her. Listening long for the echo of his step, she had sunk to sleep, with words of prayer for him the last upon her lips. He moved through the long space of the chamber, and stood beside her couch, looking on that rest to which the night brought no evil memories, and whose dreams were pure and joyous as the dreams of infancy.

Her bright hair fell unloosed about her, a flush was on her cheeks, for the night was warm, her head rested on her arm in all the grace of profound repose, and that unconscious and dreaming youth smote him tenfold with the bitterness of guilt as he stood looking down upon her in the shaded silvery light ; was his heart one on which it should be hushed, were his lips those whose kiss should wake her from her slumber ?

Once more in the shadows of the night the eyes of his

temptress and destroyer had looked on him, rising up from the surge of the multitudes as she had risen from the surge of the waves, forbidding him peace, claiming him hers by right of their dead sin, by right of their mutual guilt to the life which had been slaughtered by the lie of the traitress, and by the hand of the assassin. What place had *he* beside the rest of innocence? It were juster that he were driven out to dwell with the lost, and the accursed, in the shame and the hatred of all things pure and sinless, of all lives loved of God.

As though even in sleep conscious when he was near, Lucille stirred, and awakened, with the light in her fair eyes, and the smile upon her face with which she had awakened from the sleep of childhood in her dead mother's bosom, and had looked upward to the gaze of him whose crime had made her desolate ere yet she knew her loss or felt her wrong. Her low cry thrilled his heart with its waking welcome, the flush of a beautiful gladness deepened the warmth of her cheeks, her arms were thrown about his neck, while her lips breathlessly whispered sweet, eager questions for his honour, his triumphs, his greatness, all dear to her, as the life to which, in *her* sight, they gave the sanctity of the Patriot and the grandeur of the Ruler.

The voice which answered her quivered slightly; the lips which met her caress were cold; the face which bent over her was dark and worn with the memories which thronged about him in the hush of

night. The colour died from her cheek, the light was quenched in her eyes, the shadow of his own fate fell upon her.

“ You suffer ? You are ill ? What is it—what has grieved you ? ” she asked him, in the rapid dread, the vague terror of any evil which menaced him.

He drew her closer to his heart, and the dissimulation, the self-control which were alike his nature and training, did not desert him now.

“ Nothing, my own love. I have been speaking two hours, and the debate has been a tempestuous and lengthened one, till for once I am weary and fatigued ; that is all.”

She did not doubt him : that his lips would have spoken other words save those of truth, she dreamed no more than she dreamed of the blood-stain on his life ; but the eyes which took all their joy from his gazed wistfully upward to the face which, waking from her slumber, she had seen, not for the first time darkened and careworn, with the resurrection of a guilty past, the futile yearning of a great remorse.

“ All ? You are sure it is all ? ” she asked him, wistfully. “ You would not keep anything from me even in love ? You would not withhold even a thought ? You would let Lucille share your pain as she shares your glory ? ”

His heart sickened, his conscience shrank under the tender words ; his eyes, fathomless and unrevealing beneath every gaze and every torture, fell under the questioning appeal of those uplifted to him in their innocence, unconscious of the anguish that they dealt.

Evil should not have been the salvation which had saved her; guilt should not have been the secret of the heart on which hers leaned! A quick shudder ran through his frame; he drew her to him with passionate force.

“None would have loved you as I love? None could have been to you as I am, Lucille?”

“Ah! No, no. Why ask?—you know that so well!”

And as she clung to him, her bright hair falling over his arms, her eyes full of such liquid light as painters give to the pure and happy eyes of angels, she heard but in his words the tenderness of her husband’s love, and had no knowledge in them of the sleepless dread of that remorse which strove to lull its suffering, and to find peace where no peace was, with the remembrance of her guiltless life, blessing and blessed by him.

## CHAPTER XVI.

## THE OUTCAST BY THE GATES.

LIGHT, and colouring, the coolness of water, the shade of leafy depths, the fragrance of flowers, the green belts of sloping lawns, and the sparkling spray of fountain columns tossed aloft among the brilliance of blossom and the lofty heads of trees, all she thirsted for were here, where Marion Vasour stood looking through the iron tracery of gates, as the prisoner through his bars gazes at the world to which he can never go forth again. They were the lodge-gates to the grounds of the Thames villa of S. A. R. le Duc d'Etoiles, filled with the choicest gathering of England at a brilliant fête, that was simply called a garden party. Where she stood, crouched down against the iron scroll-work, in the dust of the highway, she could see the velvet slopes of turf, the pyramids of bloom, the glimpse of white

distant terraces through the breaks of stately avenues—she could hear the swell of far-off music, even the low murmur of a laugh when a group swept near—she could breathe in the rich fragrance of flowers and of perfumes—she could look, in one word, on the life of her Past.

A few years since, and he who was host there had led her through the salons of the Tuileries, bending to her word in homage, seeking no empire so precious as one smile from the lips that poets hymned, and the eyes that recalled all the glory of Helen's. A few years since, and she had been of them, with them, omnipotent by right of every sovereign grace—unrivalled, were it only by the light of that *angelico riso* which played upon no other beauty as it played on hers.

Now the Prince d'Etoiles would have passed her by unknown;—and she stood without his gates among the outcasts of the great highway, one with the roofless, nameless beggars, who, in the whirling dust and summer scorch, crouched among the trampling hoofs and crowded wheels to look with hungry, wondering eyes through the bars at these stray glimpses of the life, so unlike theirs, that their sight could not grasp, nor their fancy realise it. Her hands were clenched upon the bars, her brow was pressed on the cold iron; she saw the blent light and shadow, with the sun-gleam on the lawns, and the glimpses of blossom and of colour that glanced between the trees; she hungered for her life that was lost for ever; she

stood an alien and an exile looking on the things that knew her no more !

The white wand of a lacquey struck her on the shoulder with a sharp reprimand ; the same action, the same words with which, in the years that were gone, the chasseur of the Marchioness of Vavasour and Vaux had used to the Bohemian Redempta. There is a wild, wanton Nemesis at times in human life. She started at the blow and the indignity ; for the moment she forgot that she had no longer the power to *resent*—most bitter loss of this world's losses ! —and turned with her old superb grace, with her old proud patrician rebuke.

In the carriage, whose way she stopped, its occupant leaned back among the cushions alone, bowing, something haughtily and distantly, as the throng, gathered about the gates, lifted their hats to salute him. As she raised her head, she met his eyes ; he knew her ; a quiver passed over his face ; he shrank visibly, irrepressibly, as though a knife had struck him ; and his carriage swept on through the ducal gates, leaving her without in the dust and the throng of the parched highway.

A moment before, full of the projects, the contests, the purposes, and the successes of power, of the attitude of the session which hitherto been in all its triumphs his own *aristeia*, and of the far-stretching foresight and matured calculations of the ambition which had been from his youth, and would be to his death, his master-passion, Strathmore, at sight of her,

forgot all save his past, its dead guilt leaving its weakness in the life in all else strong—its buried crime claiming him slave, who in all else was ruler. Leader and chief, master of men, and moulder of circumstance, he could not purchase or enforce oblivion—he could not choose but bow, conscience-stricken, before the eyes of an outcast in the throng! He had loved her, he had sinned for her: she was in his life for ever, its burden, its retribution, its destroyer.

All his past came back, with that one look from the sleepless eyes of Marion Vavasour.

While he joined his own world, while he spoke the courtly nothings of the day, while he chatted with princes and with peers, and moved through the brilliant groups of the gardens, her memory was on him, and the sense of a remembered crime, fresh as though born of yesterday, upon his life.

A few lengths of leafy avenue, a few stretches of sward, and he looked on the fairness of Lucille's face, in its first and loveliest dawn of youth—youth without a shadow, without a fear, without a soil. The centre of a group whose polished homage she still heard with naïf surprise, and still turned from with graceful carelessness, she stood on the broad white steps of a terrace, where a thousand blossoms encircled her in their luxuriant colours, like a young Angel of the Flowers. Against her leant a handsome boy, a little heir of the house, who looked up at her with loving eyes, while she smiled down upon his beauty and wound a wreath of half-opened lilies among

his golden locks, as much a child as he, as joyous and as innocent. She was a picture, soft as a poet's dream, in the haze of earliest summer; yet he looked on it with a shudder: he saw it through the darkness of his past. A brief while, and he knew that she would smile thus upon the laughing eyes, and toy thus with the sunny hair, of a child born to his race, and bearer of his name,—and he from whom her child would take existence, had been the destroyer of her father!

Thus ever his own sin recoiled and struck him, in his gentlest thoughts, his purest hours.

Strathmore, to whom fear was unknown, and in whom the common weaknesses of men had no place, dreaded with untold horror to see the eyes of Marion Vavasour fasten on Lucille; he felt as though the very air must tell his secret when she passed the woman whose lie had made him slay the man whom he had loved.

In his vengeance he had bidden her go forth to the fate that waited her; to live as they live, who trade in beauty, to die as they die, craving a crust. His bidding had been obeyed, the condemnation to which he had sent her out had become hers to the uttermost of its law; and now—the Outcast he had made, was in his path, stronger than his strength, more powerful in her abject wretchedness than he in his haughty eminence, an *Até* that dogged his steps, and rose, haunting and abhorred, between him and the light of the summer sun, between him and the holiness of innocence. Where he

stood, with a calm smile on his lips, with serene and witty words at his command, flattered, honoured, sought, a courtier, a statesman, no ambition beyond his grasp, no rank but what could be his at his will, his thoughts were filled with restless, fugitive schemes to banish from his sight, and thrust out of his world, that nameless beggar at the gates!

A homeless wanderer was more powerful than he; he had had his vengeance, whose sweetness he had once said could never escape him, but its fruit was his also, and of whatever it brought forth must he eat.

An hour later and his carriage swept with swift and silent roll over the turf, and under the pleasant shadow of the trees, in the warmth of the setting sun. Lucille lay back beside him, her bright, rapid words broken with sweet melody of happy laughter, her face turned to him, radiant with the gay softness of her father's smile, while she told him a thousand brilliant, airy trifles of the world that was so new to her, and of which she saw but one phase,—full of graceful beauty, and harmonious as music to *her*. And he heard her while his thoughts were heavy with deadly memories, he looked on her uplifted eyes while his own restlessly sought the face of the woman to whom he was for ever bound by the indissoluble bondage of a mutual crime. He dreaded the gaze of his traitress, as he had never dreaded the close presence of death when the waves beat him down, and the cold, curled mass of the reared waters buried him

beneath them—he dreaded for it to fall on the one beside him, as men dread the breath of a pestilence to pass over what they love.

The carriage swept on through the green avenues and the sunlit freshness of the park, along the side of glancing water, and with the low gladness of mirth on his ear. Suddenly Lucille's voice dropped, her laugh was hushed, over her face stole the earnest sadness of a deep compassion ; she leaned nearer to him, and her hand stole into his.

“Look there ! That is the woman to whom I gave my roses. How weary, how wretched, how *lost* she looks ! Could we do nothing for her ?”

And he heard the pitying words spoken of her father's murderer !—he saw her eyes fill with a divine tenderness for the woman whom he had loved with a madman's passion, and sent out to a vengeance great as her guilt and his own !

By a ghastly fascination his glance followed hers into the throng about the gates through which they passed, and he saw, fastened on Lucille's face, a look like the chained and baffled panther's, thirsting for her prey ; a look that sent through all his veins an icy shiver.

Lucille turned pale, and her large soft eyes, which rested on the outcast with such mournful pity, filled with a startled fear like those of a young fawn, as she leant farther back in the barouche, and her hand unconsciously closed nearer on his.

“How strangely she looks ! She frightens me !”

For his life, for her life, he could not have answered her, while upon them was the gaze of Marion Vassour quoting the past, claiming the future, by right of that mutual, unexpiated crime which had destroyed the guiltless. His face grew white, his courage shrank from Lucille's exclamation, he shuddered beneath the clinging touch of her hand; and the woman who watched them saw that even now the first hour of her vengeance had come, that even now she had pierced through the single weakness of his mailed strength, and forced him to *remember*.

A moment more, and the carriage swept on through the light and shade, leaving the homeless wanderer in the throng; and he saw but his own memory of the woman he had worshipped, of the woman who had betrayed him, with the diamonds crowning the gold wealth of her hair, and the lustrous, languid light in her antelope eyes, as she had been in the glory of her youth, in the sovereignty of her beauty, on the night when, at her tempting, he bowed and fell, knowing nothing save the sweetness of her kiss!

Lucille looked upward at him with anxious wistfulness.

“Are you in pain? Are you ill?”

Life could not have held for him a more bitter pang than lay in her question!

But he was long used to wear the impenetrable armour of an unmoved serenity, and live beside a guiltless life without a sign of self-betrayal. His voice had its accustomed calm as he answered her,

and his eyes met hers with their old tenderness, if in them there was a deeper and more weary melancholy.

“No, my dear one, it is nothing—save the heat, perhaps, and I am somewhat tired. But,—Lucille,—do not look at those unhappy outcasts again; you cannot help them; the vastest wealth could not avail to succour all the wretchedness of a great city; it only agitates you, and is injurious for you, my darling, and, as such, pains me.”

Those who had best known his past, could not have heard in his words or in his voice the betrayal of anything save solicitude for her; still less could she have done so.

She looked upward at him with a smile that was earnest and almost mournful.

“I will not, if I can help it; but when I see any who look so hopeless as that, I wonder why life is so beautiful for me and is so stricken for them! Why is there so *much* misery? All would love God, and do good, I think, if they were happy?”

“A beautiful and simple code of ethics, my child! —if you could give the world your innocence and your faith, it might be true.”

“But is it not true?” pleaded Lucille, while her thoughts travelled wistfully over the mysteries of evil and of pain which were vague and strange to her dawning life, which had been one long, cloudless day, under one guardian care since her birth. “Love is born of gentleness, and gentleness, I think, would win

the harshest and the most lost to *something* better. Perhaps if even that woman we saw just now had been shown mercy when she first suffered, she might not be so utterly callous as she looks? How strangely her eyes fastened on me, did you see? Why was it?"

How could she know that every one of her words was worse than a dagger in his heart?

"Why, my love?" repeated Strathmore, wearily. "Why? Because those who are lost and evil, hate all that is guileless and pure! Because her life is guilty, and yours is sinless!"

As the night follows the day, Marion Vavasour followed the lives she hated. Having once seen that her sight and her presence had power to pierce him to the quick, she never released him from it; wherever one of the people could follow a man of rank and eminence, she followed him; secretly, so that no other noted her, but surely and constantly, until that vigil, veiled but unceasing, grew intolerable to him, with that torture which he had dealt out to her, when, before the stroke of his vengeance fell in the sight of assembled Paris, go where she would his eyes were upon her, seek escape as she might his silent presence was ever near, mutely quoting to her the Past, mutely menacing the Future.

When he left the Lower House, or drove out of Downing-street, he saw her; when he passed from State ceremonies he met her eyes, where she stood

amidst the crowds which thronged the approaches of the palace, and were trodden by horses' hoofs, and driven asunder by the whips of lacqueys. Leaving the fond words and lingering farewell of Lucille in the brightness of morning, there, near his gates, in the sunlight, would be the form of the woman whom his vengeance had driven out among the lost, nameless, hopeless multitude. Going from the closeness of contests, from the struggle of parties, from the question of peace or war, weary with the heated pressure of lengthened debate, or the success of a hard-won victory, his pride was stricken, his victory was embittered, his strength beaten down, his greatness made miserable and worthless in his sight, by the guilt that was brought back upon his memory as he saw the face of his temptress in the midnight gloom, or in the greyness of the breaking dawn.

Her presence—almost *felt* rather than actually seen—grew intolerable to him; the sight of that haggard face, with its thirsty eyes and its wreck of womanhood, its fearful relics of grace and of beauty, lingering there as though in hideous mockery of what she once had been, became feared by him to whom fear was unknown, with a nervous and unconquerable dread. He strove to bury his past, to live it down, to wash it out with the assoiling of atonement, to steep it to oblivion in the fair life that he cherished and guarded, and force it into silence under the grandeur of a dazzling and ambitious

career,—and Marion Vavasour was for ever before him, the haunting wraith of those dead years, the avenger, as she had been the temptress, of his crime.

He could not free himself from her ; he was powerless here. Wealth, station, command, were impotent to force out of his path the woman who dogged it ; eminence and authority were of no avail to put away from him the pursuant presence of an outcast. Life was hers as it was his, and where she came was common to the poorest as to the proudest, the broad and crowded highway of the world. True, he could have given her into arrest as a vagrant, but that he dared not do ; he knew the menace that spoke in her eyes, he knew that from her lips enough might be told of the past that bound them, and of that hour in the solitude of the sea-storm, when his hand had loosed her to the grave, to crush and break for ever with its horror Lucille's love and life.

She knew not the vengeance which she held thus unconscious in her hands, but *he* knew it ; and it chained him from every act which might have otherwise released him from the woman who, under the scourge and agony of his denial, had prophesied the hour when he should ask in vain of earth or heaven the mercy he had refused. Now and again wild, dark, baseless thoughts drifted through Strathmore's mind, for his nature could not wholly change ; but they were each perforce abandoned,

each fraught with too close danger of waking the very evil that he feared. The sense of weakness and of dread tightened upon him, worst tyranny of all to the man to whom feebleness and fear were craven things, unknown and unpitied ; a baffled impotent hopelessness began to gnaw into his life as it had done when he had first learned that Valdor had unearthed his secret ; a sense of despair grew on him ; atonement was a madman's dream, since guilt was deathless thus !

He dreaded, moreover, lest Lucille should note the constant vigil of the woman to whom she had given her roses ; lest she should question him of it in her ignorance, whilst he, powerful in wealth, in rank, in command, would be powerless to drive out from her the presence, and ward from her the gaze of the one in whom she saw but a beggared wanderer of the People. When he was not with her, he sought with almost morbid solicitude that she should never be alone. His own days, claimed and absorbed by public life, he provided that all her hours should be so filled with a succession of pleasures, entertainments, and companionship, that in his absence no space should be left for her to spend in solitude, that she should never observe how closely the outcast to whom she had tendered her flowers watched her when she drove from her own gates.

For Marion Vavasour, in the strange caprice of a hopeless hatred, which grew the more bitter because each day as it rolled by brought her but a more

vivid sense of its own utter impotence for vengeance, never wearied in following the young girl whom she longed to destroy not less than to destroy him. Day after day, night after night, she spent the long hours watching and waiting for one glimpse of Lucille.

Under the park trees, where those more homeless and more wretched yet than she, had slept through the summer nights, and lay in the dry long grass in the sun, staring blankly at the delicate glittering throng of the life with which they had nothing in common,—scarcely their humanity,—she saw her sweep by through the light, whilst men checked their horses, and the crowd without the rails turned to gaze after a loveliness that touched all those who looked on it, who bore it away, rather in their hearts than in their thoughts, as men who have looked on a face of Titian, or a dream of Delaroche, bear its memory away into the heat and noise of the busy streets and the avarice and struggles of their narrow lives, and are the better for it, though they scarce know why. In the stillness of a Sunday noon she would steal down and hide amongst the hanging foliage, where she had been given alms from Strathmore's wealth, and watch, from the distance, where Lucille wandered among the aisles of her rose-gardens, or rested near him where he sat, as they believed unseen, under the shadow of cedars or acacias, whilst he listened to her words with the smile upon his lips that was—for the moment at least—a smile of peace and happiness. In the

Lucille, to the memory of both had returned the words that Redempta the Zingara had spoken, long years before, when they who had become each other's curse first met under the summer stars, by the Bohemian waters :

“ There shall be love ; and of the love, sin ; and of the sin, crime ; and of the crime, a curse ; and the curse shall pursue and destroy the innocent.”

The curse already had destroyed lives that were guiltless :—was yet another still demanded ?

## CHAPTER XVII.

THALASSIS ! THALASSIS !

IT was on the close of a burning day in the hot Midi ; a day of intolerable glare, of destroying drought, of parched, stifling, cholera-laden noxiousness under those brazen skies, within those relentless walls of the Toulon Bagné. The horrible heat had made even the *gardes-chiourmes* heavy and listless, and they had suffered a few of the *forçats*, unchidden, to drop down, gasping and powerless, like panting hounds ; nature wears itself out, and humanity is remembered now and then, even in a convict prison.

At one part of the fortifications a brace of galley-slaves was working, a little asunder from the rest, on a sandy level facing the sea, with a single overseer near them ; brandy, and the heat, and the sand glitter, made the *garde* sleepy and inattentive ; while heavy bribes from a young Englishman, who had of late been much about the Bagné, had

something, yet more than the sultry air, and the fumes of the *petits verres*, to do with his unusual lack of vigilance and the separate post of labour he had given to the political *déportés*, on that stretch of sand excavations lying in front of the stirless summer sea. They were kept late at labour there, for the new stone curtain and redoubts that were to be erected at that point were pressing, and the government had directed that no time should be lost, but that separate parties of the *galériens* should be told off, to continue the works night and day until they were completed.

The *forçats* were of less value than the brutes whose toil they bore, and to whose labour they were harnessed ; it mattered nothing how many hundred of them might wear out, drop down, and perish in that giant travail—if they died by droves so much the better, there were the less expenses for the exchequer.

The hot day faded, the twilight fell lightly, rapidly, without stars, for the skies were black and stormy. The *garde-chiourme* lit his lantern, the prisoners toiled on, with spade and pickaxe, deep down in the sand and gravel, with their backs bowed and their limbs weighted with irons, and their breath like blown and worn-out horses in that unnatural and herculean toil to which their lives had no habit, their limbs had no use ; while scattered all along the sand level were the chains of convicts, with the crack of the overseers'

whips sounding on the silence, and the glitter of the lanterns shining down the line in the descending twilight that would soon be night.

And beyond, on the water, the yacht lay at anchor, with a blue light, that she had hung out for many nights past, burning at the mast-head, to prevent, as it was understood, her being run down in the darkness by the *chasse-marées* and other vessels that came to or past the port of Toulon, trading from Italy and the East.

The *garde-chiourme*, with grumbling imprecations, turned to re-light his lantern that had gone out, setting it down on a block of granite while he adjusted its wick, growling coarse Bas-Rhin oaths at his prisoners for not doing their work quicker; it was a signal, though no word had ever passed between him and them; a slight risk made worth his while to bear by Lionel Caryll's rouleaux of gold pieces, with which he could purchase his escape from his hateful post, and buy the little strip of land in Alsace, which ever since his boyhood he had vainly coveted. His back was turned; with a wrench the *déportés* tore asunder the irons which had been all but filed through, and only hung together by a link, sprang up out of the pit in which they worked, and fled, fleet as hill-deer, over the sandy surface in the grey of the falling night, their footfall noiseless on the loose and yielding earth. Busy with his lantern, he did not, or seemed not to, hear their stealthy and sudden flight. When he turned

the full blaze of his light on the gravel-pit, and, looking down, found the yawning hole untenanted, and raised the hue-and-cry, the *condamnés* had had three minutes' start—a priceless treasure in that race for liberty and life.

The alarm was given. Force, brutal and omnipotent, was out like a sleuth-hound after those who sought that most begrimed and costly thing on earth—their Freedom.

The bastions swarmed with soldiery; the *gardes-chiourmes* poured out with hunters' fury, petty tyrants who had lost their slaves; the shots rang on the still night, all Toulon was astir; two *forçats* had escaped, two men out of whom all sense and sin of that daring vice of Liberty should have been crushed and drilled in the granite walls and under the iron chains of the life that had lowered them to beasts, and robbed them even of their Names. The Bagne was in tumult, the hell-hounds tore out on the search over the wide sand level stretching to the sea, the bullets hissed through the air, the gendarmes hurled themselves, armed to the teeth, on the track of the fugitives. Inside the Bagne they would have been recaptured at once; outside the walls there was one chance, for that one chance was the Sea.

The Sea!—incarnate liberty itself, that held out freedom to the bondsmen. The shots seethed past them and fell round them, scattering the sand in their eyes and ploughing the ground at their feet, their

ankles plunged into the loose soil, the yells, and shouts, and curses of the alarm were borne to their ears on the wind, their limbs were dragged down by links of the hanging chains, their strength was impoverished by toil and misery, a fate worse than death was close on them, with every second that brought their pursuers nearer and nearer ere they could reach the grey line of the gleaming water, longed for, panted for, so near and yet so far ! Across the line of sand, yellow and level in the fitful shadows, with the severed fetters clanging like the trailing irons of escaping slaves, with the press of the close pursuit hunting them down, with the sound of the seas and the roar of the following multitude, the crash of the gendarmes' tread, and the hiss of the plunging shot deafening their ear and giddying their brain, with life and liberty beyond, and behind a doom more dread than death, they fled on through the heavy, breathless night.

They reached the water edge ; the loose, fresh-raised sand embankment overhung the sea by some eight feet, the waves surging and churning below under the lash of the rising mistral. With that might, which desperation alone can lend, they cleared it with a bound of agony, and fell with a low, sullen splash and plunge into the dark waters.

A volley, fired by those in pursuit, thundered down the shore ; the balls hissed and shrieked as they cut the water, while the oaths of gardes and gendarmes

yelled furious upon the air. One, as he rose to the surface, was shot through the back; with a scream that echoed over the sea, he bounded out of the water in the reddened light, then sank never to rise again. The other dived, and the storm of balls passed harmlessly above him; ere he had leaped, he had torn off with such convulsive strength as is born of a supreme despair, the irons still clinging to his foot. He had no weight on him; he was a fearless swimmer; and there, at the mast-head, burned the signal-light, that to him, and for him, meant aid, succour, welcome, liberty, and all the breadth and freedom of the world. He kept under water, only rising rarely to the surface, and then so cautiously, that in the shadowy sultry evening he was unseen.\* Those on the shore had seen both sink when the volley had been fired; they supposed both had been shot down when the death-shriek had rung over the sea. It was of little moment; both were dead instead of both *déportés*. The sea was alive for a while with boats, and lanterns, and men groping with grappling hooks and fishing-nets for the drowned bodies; while torches flung their ruddy glare over the white foam and black, angry waters, and he who lay under the waves, amidst the tumult and the flickering glare above him, knew—with every sound that passed, with every breath,

\* In case any resemblance may be traced between the escapes of Valdor and of Jean Valjean, I may observe that the above chapter was written before I read the "Misérables," or knew that there was such an episode in the work.

for which he stole upward to the air in stealth and suffocation—the bitterness of death.

Then—as though nature herself lent succour from the brutality of man to man, which outruns all the rage of desert birds, all the ferocity of forest beasts—the gathered clouds broke with a tempest of rain, driving, drenching, beating down the flames of the torches, and casting darkness over all the sea. The pursuit ceased, the search was given over;—the dead bodies of two *forçats* ! what were they but carrion ? At last—at last—he was alone in the sheltering water, and this darkness that to him was more blessed than ever is the sweetest light of summer moon, or gleam of bridal starlight. He rose, and through the denseness of the gloom and the ink-black sheet of falling rain, he saw, beaming star-like, the little azure light. Liberty, life, all the lost glories of his strength, all the robbed vigour of his manhood, swept back with a rush all through his frame. Even in that instant of mortal danger and physical misery, once more he had hope, and he had freedom; they are the twin angels of men's lives.

He swam out to the bright blue starry light—swam with that strength which comes in the extreme hours of our fate, making us “rend the cords even as green withes.”

A few brief seconds more, and he stood on the deck; Lionel Caryll had saved him.

“ Free—thank God ! ”

The words broke from both their lips as the wild rain-storm lashed round them ; then, without sign or show of life, he fell down at the feet of the English youth, the blood gushing from his mouth and nostrils —his senses blind and gone.

Before the sun rose, the yacht was far on her way down the Mediterranean waters ; Valdor was free.

Thus strangely does Circumstance turn avenger in this life.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

## UNDER THE WINGS OF THE ANGEL.

IT was autumn at White Ladies.

The dying leaves were once more drifting on the wind; the sun set in stormy purpled skies and tawny pomp of tempest light: the seas ran high, and hurled their white foam-crested waves upon the sands:—it was the fall of the year, rich, grand, profoundly mournful, with here and there its summer hours few and fleeting, eagerly treasured, early lost, like the last lingering smiles on dying lips, in voiceless and eternal farewell to all that they have loved and blessed.

It was autumn, and evening; and Strathmore stood on the rose-terrace of White Ladies, while the lingering rays of the sun that had set poured a golden lustre over the crimson foliage, the brown rolling woods, and the river, yellow with the dead leaves of the water-lilies. The fever of an unutterable inquietude was on

him—the fever of conscience, which knows no rest. He had left behind, in the rushing crowds and peopled streets of the great city, the face which had pursued him like a recurrent and inevitable fate ; but she was in his life, she was in his thoughts, she poisoned all his peace, she accused him in memory of that past that he had sought to crush into oblivion. She had risen out of the surge of the vast throngs as she had risen from the waves ; she had returned into his life, she who had cursed it. He did not know what he feared, yet he feared everything—*he!*—who had not known what fear was. Even the idolised life of Lucille had grown torture to him—he dreaded lest his unrest should lend its alarm to her, lest in his sleep dreaming words should betray him, lest in his eyes she should read the secret he veiled. Never yet was there crime which did not sooner or later know this doom !

He stood now looking over the sweep of forest, park, and sea that lay before him in the ruddy fading light. Power, honour, beauty of possessions, riches of heritage, the greatness which ennobles life, the love which softens and endears it—these were all his, and all were darkened, cankered, turned to misery and dread, by the shadow of one dead sin. All that was fair in his sight was poisoned by the past ; all that was sacred for him was imperilled by his guilt ; all that was dearest to him would be destroyed for ever, if one voice arose to whisper the knowledge his heart held.

His eyes filled with yearning and with pain as he

gazed at the west, where the sun had sunk beyond the sea. He thought of Erroll.

“He is avenged—he is avenged!” he murmured, where he stood in the silence of the falling evening, “more utterly than if I had died upon a scaffold, as other murderers die !”

Yes—for the pang of the scaffold is but a moment, and Strathmore’s chastisement was lifelong.

Like a promise of redemption, she whom the dead had bequeathed him looked upward in his eyes in the last lingering sunlight, as her hand stole into his.

“Why have you left me ? We are alone for a day at the least, and when alone you are wholly my own!”

He shrank from the caressing words: “wholly hers !” while the darkness of the past claimed him, drawing him ever and ever down out of the innocence and light of her presence into its pestilential memories !

He pressed her to him with a passionate instinct, a feverish tenderness, born of a terrible and nameless prevision.

“Lucille!—Lucille! I have never given you an hour’s pain—never denied you a single wish ? I have made you happy ? My love is sufficient for you, and you want no other ?”

He spoke as he had spoken when she had wakened from her sleep, in vague, oppressive misery, in restless, irresistible longing to be told, again and again

from her own lips, that through her the atonement of his sin was made. Oh, madman! who thought that atonement lay in the happiness of another life, instead of in the purification from passion, the renunciation of evil, of his own!

She looked up at him with wondering pain, and on her face was the look of an unspeakable love—a love beyond her childhood's faith, beyond her joyous youth; spiritualised, exhaustless, “faithful unto death,” mournful even in its intensity, as though the tragedy from whence it sprang unconsciously shadowed it, and made it less the offspring of joy than the angel of consolation.

“Oh, my lord—my love!” she said, softly and passionately, while the tears rose up and stood in the eyes where, to him, there ever seemed to lie the sadness of her father's fate and of her young mother's piteous doom. “Have you need to ask me *that*? He whom you loved, knows how Lucille loves you. My life has no thought, no wish, no memory, but what are yours, for is not my life—*you*?”

He pressed her in a close embrace, that she might not see how his eyes filled and his face paled at the reverence and the sweetness of those tender words;—she loved him thus, and of that very love would be her death-blow, if ever from her father's distant grave the truth should arise and be revealed.

A letter she had lain down on the marble gleamed white against the dark and crimson leaves of the

autumn roses ; the superscription lay uppermost ; as his glance, mechanically and without note of it, fell on the writing, he started with a shudder that she felt through all her frame as his arms were wound about her.

He loosened her from him, and seized it—all the golden and purple glories of the sunset reeled before his sight. The writing was that of the man who held his fate—of the hand that he had thought to weigh and fasten down, paralysed for ever, beneath the irons of the Toulon galley-slave.

“That letter !—That letter !——”

The words died on his lips faint and ill formed ; even from her in that moment he could not wholly hide the terror that fell on him, passing all cowards' fear of death.

She looked upward, with the swiftness of affection, to notice any shade of pain.

“ Why ? What is it ? Nothing that grieves you ? It came just now ; I took it from them, and brought it to you.”

“ Quite right !” In that instant he had recovered self-command, and his voice was measured and gentle. “ It gave me pain at the moment, my love, for—for—it is the writing of one whom I believed worse than dead. Leave me alone to read it. See !—there are your fawns waiting for you. Go, and give them their roses.”

She looked at him a moment with wistful uncertainty ; his voice was tranquil now, and he smiled on

her, yet she could not forget that shudder which she had felt convulse him as she had been gathered in his arms.

“Go, my darling,” he said, with a smile—a smile while his hand closed on the letter of the man whom he had thought silenced, as by the silence of the grave! “Go;—I would be alone a few moments.”

She looked at him again, wistfully still; then went, for his wish was her law—went with the grace and swiftness of youth, for she had still a child’s pure pleasures, her hands filled with autumn roses, her hair glancing in the sunlight, while the young deer trooped to meet her with the delicate chimes of their bells.

And he stood there with the opened letter in his hand, and the prescience of calamity, which had been upon him since he had first seen the face of Marion Vavasour in the summer midnight, become palpable, and fronting him with the work of his own hand. The crimson from the west shone full upon the page, and the words seemed to reel in a scarlet haze before him as he read :

“Strathmore, I am free, and in England. You may have learnt, ere now, that your noble nephew gave me liberty, and regained me more than life. I shall await you to-night on the shore by the monastery church; you will come as soon as the night has fallen.

“VALDOR.”

He who had been so deeply wronged, wrote with the command of a monarch—he who had wronged, stood with the letter crushed in his hand, without sense, sight, movement ; all his life blasted in him.

The blow fell unsoftened, unprepared ; the letters by which Lionel Caryll, bound to silence for a while, had at last, from the East, sent the tidings of his rescue of the condemned, had not as yet reached him. The words he read were like the delirium of a dream ; the force which had unlocked the prisoner's chains and set him free, seemed unreal, unnatural, as power that should have burst the bonds of death and given resurrection from the grave. This was all he knew : that he who had the secret of his life had risen from a bondage, certain as the tomb, and held a vengeance vast as his own wrong !

As a tiger leaps from the gloom ere its presence is seen or its passage is traced, so his retribution sprang upon him. All was dark round him ; unintelligible, untold ; the prison gates had been broken, the living sepulchre been unsealed ; his wealth, which had sent his young kinsman to wander at will in foreign lands, had been turned into the power which had loosed the fetters, and released the captivity of the man he had betrayed and condemned ; the net of his own acts was wound about him ; the dishonour which had seemed wisdom in his sight had been forged into the weapon of his own destruction. *His !* not his alone, or he had borne it. It was the life of Lucille that his dead sin menaced. For her he had

done this thing; against her it now rose beyond his strength to save.

A stunned silence and tranquillity fell on him; suddenly and mutely as poison kills, all his life was shattered, and all hope destroyed;—there is no resistance in an absolute despair.

He held the letter clenched in his right hand, his face was grey and bloodless as a dead man's, he gazed with a blank stare out at the rose-hued, golden light: the world was unreal about him, the sun-rays glared blood-red in his sight; he saw the face of Lucille, but it seemed far off—gazing at him with love that was anguish, with eyes that pierced his soul and saw the history there, with holiness that barred him from her and divorced them for evermore, while she floated farther and farther from him, borne away by an angel-band.

Dizziness seized him, he felt his senses failing, his sight growing dim: instinctively he grasped the marble column near, and strove to keep his consciousness, his calm;—she must not know!

“*Not know!*” He remembered that when the space of that night should be passed the knowledge of all would have reached her. He knew that she must die:—the life that lived but in his own, and the yet unborn life that he had given, both perish through his sin.

\* \* \* \* \*

She stood before him, with the fragrant roses in

her hand, and the lingering stray beams of light shining in the spiritual sweetness of her eyes.

He shuddered beneath her gaze ;—all that was dearest to him grew worse torture than devils frame. A little while,—and she would know him as he was. A little while,—and she would know that his kiss was accursed on her lips, that the barrier of an ineffaceable sin sundered them for ever, that the love she held the truest guardianship on earth was but a vain atonement for a brutal crime.

She came and knelt beside him, she wound her arms about him, she sought his lips with her caresses. Was he in suffering, was he in pain ? He was silent to her ! Why ? He would keep nothing that grieved him from *her*, even in love ?

And he had to smile on her while his heart was breaking ! He had to look down into her eyes, while he knew that towards them stole the doom of his past ! Imprisoned from her sight through all her life, his hidden sin was loosed to rend her from him and destroy her at the last. And in the failing light she gazed upward with her deep, dreaming love, and her lips, with the sinless smile of childhood, were lifted for his kiss !

O God !—the throbs of his heart, as they beat against hers, must tell her he thought the secret they held ; on the darkness of his face she must behold the darkness of his soul ! She leaned her cheek upon his hand,—the blood-stain there must scorch her. She laid her

head against his breast,—the guilt it veiled must scare her from her resting-place.

The guardian of her peace, the husband of her youth, the idol of her trustful life—and through him she must die!

His arms closed round her with passionate anguish, his lips clung to hers with endless kisses,—to him it was as the embrace of death, to him it was hopeless as an eternal farewell.

Yet he held from her all sign;—he spared her while he could all knowledge of his torture;—he sacrificed his misery to her, as he would have sacrificed honour, greatness, life itself, and given himself to an eternity of woe, could he have bought redemption at his cost for her alone.

He left her;—and she had seen no trace of the agony which could have broken its bonds, and flung him at her feet, with tears of blood at every smile her fond eyes gave to his, at every lingering touch her lips left on his own. But where she could not follow or behold him—out in the shadows of the falling night, under the shelter of the leaves—that agony had its way, nature conquered the force that had chained it down and forbidden it all utterance.

He stood and gazed at her through the unclosed casements;—he knew that in life they might never meet again. The light fell around her, flowers in a wilderness of bloom enclosed her, above her, there stretched through the shadows, the ivory spear, and

the white wings, of a sculptured Angel, Ithuriel; and upward to the statue's face she lifted her soft, haunting eyes, the eyes where the sadness of the past ever lay beneath the smile of childhood. And she must perish!—she, the redeemer of his life, by whom atonement had come to him, through whom all holier things had touched his heart. He wondered that he lived!—that dumb, stupified wonder of despair which seizes those who suffer, those to whom death *will not come*.

He saw nothing but her—the light shed a halo like a glory on her brow; her eyes, looking outward to the night, seemed to look through his soul; and above, where the marble Ithuriel leaned, the white wings of the guardian angel enclosed her, and the white spear banned from her, the innocent and the sacrificed, his love that was accursed, his guilt that had arisen!

And out of the gloom of the ruined cloisters and the hanging screens of ivy, there crept a shadow darker than any on the night; that shadow looked with him upon the innocence that the white-winged spirit guarded; that shadow, unseen by him, followed him as he went down towards the sea.

It was the form of Marion Vavasour.

## CHAPTER XIX.

“THE BOWS OF THE MIGHTY ARE BROKEN.”

THE full autumn moon shone on the silent seas, the grey shades of the mediæval arches, and the stirless boughs drooping above the scattered ivy-covered graves, as Strathmore went through the night; went with his proud head bowed, and all the haughty serenity of his bearing broken and crushed. For he went to the man whom he had wronged.

Valdor leant against a shaft of the ruined abbey, with the light shining on his face; the ravages of captivity and of wretchedness were something worn away, but beauty, strength, brilliance, all the glory of manhood were gone, and gone for ever; and Strathmore shuddered as he looked on him. How could this man forgive? To have saved his life he could have uttered no word, have advanced no step; he paused, and stood silent. All the enormity of his sin seemed to arise and stand betwixt them; all the

vastness of the mercy he had come to seek seemed to stretch out, mocking and lost before him. “Mercy!” What title to it had he?—he who had ever denied it.

The night was very calm, and its stillness was unbroken as they met; the one saw the husband of Lucille, the other her avenger and destroyer.

“Strathmore! were *you* traitor to me?”

The words fell at last from the man he had wronged, low, almost gentle, but with reproach profound as that which alone passed the dying Cæsar’s lips to him whom he had loved too loyally.

Strathmore quivered from head to foot; traitor he had been, but there was no treachery in his blood. With a lie he could have disarmed this man; with a lie have denied the charge; there was no proof against him save such as his own words should give; no living soul who could have brought this last sin home to him save himself. From him whom he had wronged, moreover, he came to seek a mercy so vast, that the mercy which spares from death is pale to it. But while steeped in so much error, lost in so much crime, he still clung, even in his darkness, instinctively, and at all cost, to Truth. He bowed his head.

“Yes! I betrayed you.”

“*You!*”

That one word was all he uttered, but in it all else was spoken; the reproach, too deep for passion, too generous for revenge, of the betrayed who wrote: “It is not an open enemy who hath done me this

dishonour, for then I could have borne it. It was even thou, my companion, my guide, and my own familiar friend."

"I!"—he lifted his head, and as the moonlight shone upon it, his face was filled with a terrible despair, and with that which is worse than suffering, and which had never before then reached his life—shame. "I betrayed you—for her sake!"

Viler than he was in his own sight, he could be in no man's; abhorrent of his sin, the purest could not be, more than he was then; "a traitor!" many crimes had stained, but, in his creed, none had dishonoured him till this. And the tyrant nature in him, sickening at its own evil and its own shame, laid itself bare to the bone, making no plea, seeking no lie, craving no pardon, asking no palliation, save such, if any there were, as lay in those brief words, "for her."

A deep sigh broke from the man he had ruined; he had been dealt an injury so vast, that all the life that lingered in him could not suffice to efface or repair it; he had been flung into a living tomb, and been crushed under a more lingering torture than that which gives death at a blow; his cause had been lost, his manhood had been wrecked, his strength had been destroyed for ever; yet his deep wrong was less before him in that moment than the anguish which struck him like a knife, that the friend whom he had honoured and trusted, whose bread he had broken,

and whose hand he had grasped, should have turned traitor to him.

“Better have dealt me death than have done friendship this dishonour!”

The words were brief and simple; wider rebuke lay in them than lies in invective or in curse: and Strathmore shuddered as he heard. None knew their truth more utterly than he; none honoured honour more sacredly than he who had violated it; none held its laws more just and binding than he who had broken through them.

He bowed his head as one who bows before the lash which he merits too deeply to arrest.

“Say what you will! The vilest words you give will never reach the vileness of my guilt. I wronged you more brutally than by a death-thrust; and yet—I sinned for her!”

As he spoke the last words, his head was reared with its old royal dignity of bearing, and through the misery upon his face there flashed the old untameable, inflexible passions which through life had wrecked his peace and stained his soul.

“I betrayed you to save her from my doom. To spare myself a thousand deaths I would have never turned a traitor to a dog that should have trusted me; you have known me, you know that! It was in *his* trust. I had sworn her life should be before my own; I kept it so. I have been true to *him*! You do not loathe me for my wrong to you more vilely than I loathe myself; my sin is not blacker and fouler in

your eyes than in mine ; and yet,—were it to be done again, I would do it, if so only I could save her ! Crime is more accursed to *me* than it ever was to the best life that ever shrank from it. I sicken for peace, for rest, for expiation—oh, my God, for *guiltlessness*!—and yet there is no crime I would not take on me if it could spare her. I owe her all—my soul itself!"

The words rang out on the still night, floating far over the starlit sea ; his wild erring sacrifice, his guilty grand defiance flung down before the man who held so terrible a power of vengeance, blent with the heartsickness of despair, the pathos of a vain remorse, the wretchedness of an utter impotence, of a love that was powerless to defend or save.

He who heard stood silent and motionless, his eyes fixed on Strathmore's face, on which the light of the moon fell. His own wrong, his own love, the memory of all he had endured, the knowledge that he who stood before him was the husband of Lucille,—these were forgotten in that moment ; he only saw the depth and vastness of this man's guilt, the passion and the despair of his remorse. All else seemed too poor, too mean, too utterly of self, to be remembered then ; all else seemed to float far away into oblivion before the might of this man's misery, the greatness of his hopeless thirst and travail for expiation.

Strathmore met his eyes unflinchingly ; criminal he was, but coward never. He stood erect, his face white as death and drawn as with the deep and haggard lines of age. He did not plead ; he offered no

word more that could have seemed to seek extenuation of his sin ; not even for her sake could he stoop to pray for mercy from the man he had betrayed. He knew that she must die—for he knew that the ghastliness of his past, touching her, would slay her, like the breath of the destroying angel.

"You have your vengeance—take it," he said, calmly, while his voice was changed to a hoarse and hollow utterance vibrating on the stillness. "Take it ! It is your right. The innocent and the unborn will perish together for my guilt. It is no more than *I* merit."

Valdor shuddered, and the red blood flushed his face ; for the moment he had risen above the weakness and the error of man, and had remembered alone pity such as Heaven itself may yield. But he was human—he had loved ; with those words he was dashed back to the frailty of humanity and of passion. He saw before him the lover, the lord, the possessor of the life that he had worshipped—the husband of her youth, the father of her child.

A great struggle shook him, like a storm-wind. He turned and paced the long stretch of sward under the ruined aisles, his steps falling in heavy uneven measure on the silence that was only stirred by the sighing of the waves, far down below, beyond the glimmer of the moonlit leaves.

If ever man strove between good and evil, he wrestled with his tempters then. But not for the first time did he come to the conflict, nor for the first time

had he conquered. Long ago he had striven to have strength for this hour if it came ; and he had strength now.

He drew near and stood before Strathmore in the grey calm shadow of the monastic burial-place, beside the ivy-covered lowly grave on which that solitary word was carved,

### Lucille.

“ Could you not trust me in so little ? True, I spoke to you in madness ; I refused you mercy in the blind hate of passion ; I knew not what I did ! But could you not have known me well enough to know that, when that hour was passed, I should regret ? Could you believe that, in cold blood, I should have been so vile as to take from you what loved and was loved by you ? Could you think that your appeal would not disarm me, that your remorse and your atonement would have no sanctity in my sight ? I spoke in haste—I erred ; but before the night was passed I had repented.”

“ *Repented ! Oh, my God !—and I—*”

The words rang out like a great death-cry over the silent seas.

“ And you—misjudged me ! As you misjudge me now. It is not for me to revenge your guilt—and revenge it on the guiltless ! It is not for her to suffer because I was wronged—such vengeance would be for devils ! Your secret is safe—your remorse is

sacred with me. Lucille shall never learn that you were her father's destroyer; she shall never know that she was Erroll's child. I came to say this to you —this only. Friendship is ended for ever between us; but there may be still, at the least —forgiveness.”

In his eyes, as he spoke, there was a divine light, and in his voice a divine pity; noiselessly, swiftly, as though to put aside all answer, and to spare him whom he had pardoned from his own gaze, he turned and went through the soft shadows of the leaves, through the twilight of the ruined aisle, through the stillness of the night, away down to where the sea lay. And the man whom crime had not made a coward, to whom remorse had not taught mercy, in whom misery had not availed to bring humility and pity, who had trusted to the strength of his own hand, and the mailed might of his own will, and had been his own god, his own judge, his own law, trembled like a great tree stricken at its roots as he heard the words which *spared* him, the words of that mercy which he had ever denied; and he fell down on the sward, stricken there motionless, prostrate, voiceless, as in the years that were gone he had fallen by the side of the dead whom he had slain. Never had his sin looked so great to him as in that hour in which its vengeance was withheld from him; never had his soul been so near to its redemption as now, when its vileness looked darkest in his sight, and was laid bare

in the light of an unhoped deliverance, till he beheld it as it was beheld of God.

Out of the shadow of the arches stole the human shadow that had followed him. With the glide of a snake she swept through swathes of light and breadths of gloom, through tangled grasses heavy with rain, and wide, endless stretches of park land, broken up in hill and dale, with forest-trees and deep deer-pools. As the snake steals its rapid way, so she stole on hers, swift as a stag's flight, passing, as though borne on the wind, through the twilight of the still and silvery night.

She had his secret—she had her vengeance. And ever as she went, with her amber hair loosening in the breeze sweeping from the sea, and something of her lost dead beauty lent to her face in that moonlit gleam, as her eyes flashed once more with the evil triumph, the victorious and cruel lust of the years that were gone, Marion Vavasour murmured ever, till the words were borne in strange wild rhythm on the woodland silence far away, to join the ceaseless lulling of the waves :

“ Such mercy as you gave, I give to you—no more ! ”

Lucille watched for him.

The night was hushed and very soft, with the light of the stars falling over the vast depths of woodland,

stretching downward to the sea; and as she gazed upon it, while the west wind played among her hair, and the fragrance of dew-laden flowers rose upward from the grass below, her eyes filled with tears—the tears of a joy beyond words, that trembled even at its own intensity. She was so happy!—she who shared his life as no other had ever shared it.

The murmur of the sea, the low glad belling of the deer, the odour of every blossom that was borne on the wings of the wind, the silver gleam on every leaf that quivered in the moonbeams, these were all poems to her—sweet voices that chimed in with the rejoicing of her life. And where she leaned, with the dreaming lustre in her childlike eyes, and the star-rays circling her fair bowed head, her lips moved in prayer, pure as the prayer of infancy, and as unquestioning in faith. Prayer for all things that suffered; for all lives that needed pity; for all who were weary and travel-laden, and had sinned against the holiness of love; for all the homeless and the desolate, who bore the heat and burden of the day, and knew the shadow of that merciless calamity whose knowledge had never touched her; prayer of that compassion which rises from the fullness and the gratitude of joy, and from the glory of its own hushed gladness remembers and looks back on those who suffer, and pleads for them even as angels plead.

The night itself seemed to grow holier about her, the silence to pause in purer and gentler vigil around

the sanctity of those early years, and God's own presence to encircle and to shield the life which knew him without fear as Love alone.

And towards her, through the darkness, with the noiseless swiftness of the wind, stole the shadow of the destroyer.

## CHAPTER XX.

## “IN THE SILENCE OF THE NIGHT.”

HE lay stretched on the dank earth without movement, save for the shudder that now and again ran through his frame. His guilt had been abhorred from the first hour of its committal, but his pride had remained with him unchastened, unbent, untaught, to work its doom by its scornful and blasphemous deification of will and of power. Now this, too, was stricken from his hands—his own weakness had come home to him, he had been strengthless before the recoil of his acts, he had recognised the supreme wisdom of the truth, without which all lives are at best but of warped beauty and of splendid error—the truth which lies in following that which is just, letting result come as it may with the future.

He had been *spared!* The warmth, the redemption, the divinity of that mercy which he had ever denied, had touched him as the light of morning touches the gloom, till all that is dark and impure is

bathed in its glory. Mercy,—likeness and attribute of God, which when it comes to earth makes man god-like,—he had always thrust from him ; he had veiled his face and closed his heart to it ; remorse had never taught him pardon ; striving for atonement, he had never taken its first step—forgiveness. All its softness, all its nobility, all its serene and sanctified humanity, had been dead to him, rejected, scorned, destroyed :—and now it had risen and saved him, and in its light he saw the vastness of his own sin.

All his past life lived once more for him through those long and solitary hours : as men drowning in the great waste of the sea remember every face, every link, in the years that are ended for ever, so he saw all the forgotten things of his youth and of his manhood. He seemed to look back on his life as from the depths of a grave, and to behold it—proud, powerful, generous, honoured amongst men ; but stained with error, wrecked by passion, riven at the core by the curse of one crime, and never reaching expiation because never bending to humiliation. For he had never forgiven !—he had never learned that frailty in his own life commanded from him pardon to others even for seventy times seven ; he had never recognised that his own criminality forbade to him for ever the right of judgment, and enjoined on him to his grave the duty of an exhaustless clemency, unswerving, unweakened, whatever temptation might assail.

He had never forgiven!—there, worse than in the first-born crime which had sprung from the blindness of his passions, lay the depth of his sin, the vainness of his atonement.

The night was very still.

There was no breath among the falling leaves, no movement except the ceaseless ebbing of the sea below. Countless stars shone without a floating cloud to veil them, and the long ivy coils over the lonely graves lay dark and stirless in the moonlight. There was not a sound borne on the air, not a shudder that stole through the autumnal forests; the silent hours swept on unmeasured and unbroken—for the night did not whisper the secrets it shrouded, the cold stars had no pity and uttered no warning, the world reeled on, and the innocent were unguarded, and the face of God was unseen.

Slowly and dully through the hush of the night there swung the midnight chimes of the abbey, iron strokes that dealt out the merciless passage of time, shadowy bells that echoed mournfully over the waters, wild beating cadences, now lost, now heard, dimly flung out in waves of sound upon the silence. Their melody fell upon his ear, and throbbed through his brain with a strange jarring echo, unreal and yet familiar; he rose slowly to his feet, and lifted his face to the coolness of the night. Beneath, stretched the silvered seas, where life and death had wrestled for him; around him was the deep and solemn tranquillity, when all things are at rest;

above, the star-lighted vault that reached onward and upward to the infinite.

Mercy!—the whole night seemed to throb with that one word; the sea in its depths murmured it to him by whom it had been denied; the weary bells as they swung through the stillness bore it upon the wind. Mercy!—he had no right to it; no title to it; what his life had refused, his life could not claim. Mercy! Above, in the lustre of the skies, the light of Heaven seemed shining with the glory that is Forgiveness;—and below, in the black and endless waste of the ocean, lay the abyss into which his risen sin seemed to force the life that had been without compassion.

He stretched his arms out to the dark and fathomless gulf that had been his righteous doom, and upward to that cloudless light which never till now had shone for him, which now seemed dying from his sight ere he could reach it, or implore it to stay with him yet—yet to redeem him! That voiceless prayer went up to God in the silence of the night;—who shall say that it was lost?

He turned from the solitary shore, and took his homeward way through the shadows of the old monastic burial-place, where the sepulchres were made above the sounding of the sea, and were turned eastwards, that the light of early dawn, breaking on the world, might shine first upon them—the dead.

He reeled back, struck as with his death-thrust.

Between him and the twilight of the stars, stand-

ing out from the darkness of the ivied gloom, like a wraith from the tomb, rose the form of Marion Vavasour.

With her amber hair floating on the winds, with a wild beauty come back to her from that hour from her past, with the light of a merciless triumph, and the shadow of a deathless grace strangely blent with the soiled torn garments of an outcast, and the lost misery of one in whom shame had perished for ever, she rose in his path—now, as before, claiming him hers by right of that companionship in guilt, by title of their mutual bond of sin. Temptress, traitress, assassinatress, she returned to him after the long flight of years, holding him yet her own by the close tie of died-out passions and of buried sins ; and behind the ruthless cruelty of the destroyer there looked the grand and austere justice of the Avenging Angel.

For her the sin had been sinned ; by her came its retribution.

There, between the skies and him, she rose, hovering, as it seemed, upon the watery mists, the shining brilliance of the night ;—and he gazed at her, filled with the speechless horror that had come on him when he had seen her face rise out of the depths of the sea in the white storm-flame.

A mocking mirth rang down the stillness of the night, vibrating through the chimes of midnight bells, echoing above the sounding of the seas :

“At last, Strathmore !—at last !”

“At last!”

The words broke from his lips in an unconscious echo, while the great dews gathered on his forehead, and in his eyes came the agony of the stag hunted to bay and caught within the toils. The supreme hour of his life, the supreme retribution of his sin had come. A shiver ran through his frame;—he had loved her! So well, so well! as never man loved woman, and even now the music that still lingered in her voice thrilled through him with its melody. It was the echo of his past; the echo of his youth.

Had that love ever wholly died, though hate had trodden it out and been greater than its greatest? Love is its own avenger.

“At last!” She seemed to float still before him on the shadowy luminance of the starry night, her hair flung out upon the winds, her wreck of broken and dishonoured loveliness a spectre risen from the buried years. “My lover, who lived but in my life, who saw no sun but in my eyes, who held crime sweet if I but bade it! did you think we were parted for ever? did you dream that the years could long sunder us? did you not know I should soon or late claim you my own? You are mine—you are mine! To-night I take back my empire!”

Mute, blind, paralysed, he stood and gazed at her, the sickness of horror on him; on the silvery mists of the night the words lingered; a strange triumph blent with the rich and thrilling melody of voice. Ghastlier than any curse of vengeance, more horrible than any

dagger-stroke dealt him, were those words that spoke to him in the love-tones of old!—were those words which across the great chasm of crime and enmity floated to him and smote him with his past!

Her laugh rang down again, breaking the murmur of the seas.

"What! no word when I claim back my sovereignty? No vow, no kiss? You! my lost lover—who adored the very roses that my lips had pressed, who let honour drift away, a jeered and useless thing, to lie at my feet, to rest in my bosom, to gaze in my eyes; who wooed and courted guilt, as others glory, when *my* hand pointed, and *my* voice whispered it? What! no caress, no oath, no gratitude, when by our love I claim you, and own you, alone to-night? What! the roses are dead, is the love dead too? The murdered are buried, is the love buried too?"

"In mercy,—in pity,—be silent!"

The words broke, inarticulate, from his throat; he thought her senses gone, and in the chastened passions, and pride, the poignant remorse, and self-abasement of that hour, he knew himself too deeply guilty to have title to lift himself above her, or wreak his wrongs on his destroyer. The evil had gone from him, the hatred from his life; in his own sight his infamy was now so great that it lowered hers, and withheld her from his vengeance. The relentless and iron hate with which it had pursued her had died when the light of mercy had shone on his heart, and the appeal to Heaven been

on his lips ; if she had tempted, he had avenged ; if she had murdered with her lie, he had slaughtered with his hand. What was he that he had title to condemn this woman, vast as were his wrongs, wide as were her crimes ?

She drew nearer to him, leaning on the flickering brilliance of the night like a spirit borne upon the air ; and as her eyes gazed closer into his, as her hair floated in the light, as nearer and nearer came that soiled, broken, ruined wreck of all that she had been, she saw him shudder and reel back, and close his eyes to shut out that mockery and resurrection of the past.

“ Silent ?—silent ? ” she echoed. “ Why, the days were when the world had no music for you but my voice !—when but to hear me murmur those fool’s words, ‘ I love you ! ’ honour, duty, brotherhood, men’s laws, and God’s commands, were all thought worthless ! ‘ Eternal love, eternal love ! ’ that was what you vowed me : though the earth should be shattered, and the heavens should flame like a scroll, *we* were to love for ever ! Heaven itself was not to sever *us* ! Ah ! and the love lasted but the life of the rose ! ”

“ Oh God, cease ! ”

Her words as they lingered down the air with all the unforgotten melody of old, mocking, terrible, yet with a strange and bitter sadness sighing through them,—the lament of youth, the weariness of despair—pierced him to the quick, till the pent suffering of years broke out and poured itself before the woman

by whom his youth had been destroyed, his life been wrecked.

“Love?—love? Dare you speak it to me?” he cried aloud. “Ay, I loved you, Heaven help me! I loved you, better than life, or guiltlessness, or brotherhood, or God; sorceress, temptress, traitress, that you were! You had my life, my heart, my honour, all that was mine on earth and in eternity. What were they to you? Toys that you played with, and hurled back into ruin: slaves that you dragged at your feet for the whole world to laugh at, then steeped in blood and hounded on to murder!”

A tearless sob caught his breath, and broke heavily on the silence of the night, then the loosened rush of words swept on again, all the silent reproach, all the crushed-out misery of so many years breaking their prison before the woman who had known his madness, made his doom, and suffered from his vengeance.

“Is there measurement for your sin to me? Guilty I was, but not to you; shame was glorious for you, death welcome for you, dishonour sweet for you! I gave you all the glory of my manhood, I gave you all the peace of my whole life, I gave you more—a devil’s gift, yet given because I loved you—*his* blood!—sacrificed, guiltless—*his* blood, that is on me and mine for me! Your crime is without end to me; to my dying hour the guilt you scourged me to, is on me; it poisons every innocent thing, it curses every hope of peace; every year the roses bloom, I

think of you; every summer sun that sets, I see his death-agony, I hear his dying words,—I know I slaughtered him as wild beasts kill what they hate. Oh, God! the vileness of your sin was never equalled upon earth—save—save by the vileness of my own."

Her eyes fastened on him with a strange look that seemed to burn through the misty brilliance round them, wildly mournful, cruelly triumphant; to-night, for one brief hour at least, she took back her empire, she ruled him, she tortured him, she shook his passions as the cyclone shakes the cedars; she alone was remembered by him. His proud and ice-cold life still was riven to its centre by her; in all its mailed and kingly power, within it had ever lived the agony of a cheated love, the torture of a deathless remorse; he had never forgotten the idolatry of his youth, he had never ceased to suffer! And the vain and evil triumph of her nature flashed out with exultation, even while her eyes dwelt on him with pain, which in her, too, wearied for the past—which in her, too, yearned towards all that was lost for ever!

"Vile as it was," she said, slowly, "you revenged it as brutally! Once you drove me out to what was worse than death, once you loosed me to death itself, and the storm and the waves knew more mercy than you!"

"Such mercy as you gave, I gave to you!" the words that he had spoken in the past, broke unconsciously once more from his lips, hoarse with anguish,

pleading not with her, but with the condemnation of his conscience, the accusation of his past. "I pursued you, I destroyed you, I hunted you down to ruin, as you had hunted me to fratricide. I bade you die the death that you had dealt to him. I had no pity—I—who should have seen my brotherhood in the foulest criminals that taint the earth, who should have known that I had forfeited for ever my right to judgment ! But it was not *my* wrongs that I revenged, it was not the curse on *my* life that I remembered when I smote you,—it was his ! Guiltless, you slew him. Loyal, and just, and stainless, your lie hurled him to his grave. That was your crime—for that my vengeance. Answer me now, before God, you who made me his murderer, you who slew him without pity in his glory and his youth—answer me, was the vengeance greater than the crime ? "

Where she stood before him, she to whom crime had been triumph and duty fable, who had been without pity and without remorse, shrank for one moment as though struck to the heart ; then she raised herself slowly in the starlight, with something of the old grand grace and sovereign gesture of the past, while for once in her eyes there was no evil, for once on her lips no lie.

"Greater ?—No ! But it was not *your* hand which should have dealt it, Strathmore."

He bowed his head where he stood in the bright mist shining from the sea.

“I know it,—*now!* Your sin was mine, and mine was yours. *I* had no right to strike you,—*I!*—who was guiltier yet than you.”

He had drunk the bitterest dregs in the cup of his chastisement; he had vanquished the darkest passion of his nature; he had taken submissively as his due the cruellest stripe of his scourge, now, when to the woman who had been his betrayer he spoke in peace, and accepting her sin as his own, laid down his rights of vengeance.

She was silent, in her eyes passionate hate and wild regret, love that seemed to live again, victory strange and nameless, passions dead, and conscience wakened, seemed to gleam, all mingled and in conflict, and burn through the floating shadows of the night; while on the stillness there only broke the sighing of the midnight seas, the echo of the midnight bells. She leaned nearer yet towards him, her hair driving backward in the wind, the ravages of time and shame fallen from her in the softened shade;—and with that gesture both remembered how she had once pressed his hand against her bosom and bidden him go sin for her, when with tiger-thirst she panted for blood, for life!

“Strathmore! I wronged you once; I came to-night to wrong you more. I murdered once; I came to-night to slaughter yet again! Years ago, in my extremity, you said such mercy as I gave, you gave to me. Such mercy I came to-night to give to you—no more!”

She saw him stagger again, she heard one convulsed and tearless sob break again upon the stillness, she saw in his eyes gather the wild and hunted misery that she had known,—and in that moment the vile and cruel nature inborn in the traitress revived and ruled. He suffered!—he suffered! She had her triumph; she had her foot upon the haughty, humbled neck; she had her hand upon the proud, mailed heart, to wring it as she would. Through all the course of baffled years she had waited for that hour—and it was hers.

Her laugh, jeering, victorious, abhorrent in its melody, rang on the air.

“Ah! the love lived but the life of the rose—you have replaced it. Why leave what you cherish? We can strike you through her! While she sleeps in her innocence, and dreams of your kisses, the whisper can steal to her that will scare sleep for ever, and tell her the life that her husband destroyed.”

A cry from him broke her words—a cry so terrible, so heart-broken, that as it echoed down the lonely shore and far across the waves, those sleeping out at sea heard it, and woke and shuddered, thinking it the death-wail of some drowning man sinking, beyond help, in the solitude of the ocean. It silenced even her.

This had been her coveted lust; this had been the moment for which she had watched, and waited, and pursued, and endured the weary course of loathsome years. He suffered! where she hovered, shadow-like,

before his aching sight, her eyes seemed to pierce through into his life, her laugh to echo with a devil's joy. His secret in *her* hands!—his darling's peace laid at her mercy!—than whom the panther were gentler to move, the vulture were more pitiful to spare! His lips parted, but formed no sound, the great drops stood like the sweat of death upon his brow, his limbs trembled, his eyes were fastened on her with a dumb, agonised appeal. If before that hour retribution had never overtaken him, in it retribution would have fallen on him vast as his dead crime.

“Your lips were mine!” she cried, laughing still in that mocking mirth; “their kisses must poison hers. Your hand slew him! its touch must pollute hers. Oh, lover, who lived but in my smile!—did you not know the dead passion would rise up and curse the new? Oh, lord of the iron will!—did you dream that you were stronger than fate, and vengeance, and a woman's hate, and think you could strangle your secret, and shelter your darling for ever? What! while the earth held your crime, and I still had life?—while the red grasses had once drunk his blood, and I lived to tell her the hidden sin of her husband? Strathmore, Strathmore! was *that* your wisdom, *that* your strength? Oh, fool, who thought yourself as deity! Oh, madman, who hoped that the past could ever be silenced!”

The words vibrated through the air, ringing high in cruel mockery, throbbing on the stillness with

their irony, piercing him with iron thrust; and his agony broke out in a single prayer, not to her, never to her, but to the Eternity that shone above and gazed upon him through the calm eyes of the stars.

“Lucille!—Lucille! Oh, God of the guiltless, save her!”

The prayer rang through the silence as though pleading at the very throne of heaven, borne there by all the voices of the night; before its anguish her laugh died, the triumph faded from her eyes, a sigh ran through her.

“God of the guiltless!—he is not *our* God!”

In the words there were the wild regret, the passionate derision, of a life dimly waking to remorse, and struggling under the heavy, stifling burden of unrepented sins and of inexpiable crimes.

“But he is *hers*!”

The answer was still a prayer, broken, hopeless, pleading; not to his torturer, not to his destroyer, but to those serene and lustrous worlds in which were spoken the majesty and the pity of the Infinite. Could they look on and see the sinless perish? Would the God she worshipped in her childlike trust, with every sun that rose and every night that fell, desert her now? The night swam round him, the noise of the waves surged in his brain, his lips were white and cloven, his eyes saw nothing but the face of his destroyer, and the radiance of the heavens shining far away.

There was no thought of violence, no instinct to crime in him now, sin had lost its hold upon his soul, for belief in immortality had risen there; there was nothing but a stunned, dull despair, in which he saw his own deed recoil upon the innocent, and was powerless to shield or save her.

Marion Vavasour stood and gazed on him, and in her eyes there gleamed that strange and nameless blending of hate and love, of triumph and regret, of mocking victory and of futile pain, which had come there before; if ever in her life she had loved, she had loved him, and she thought of the glory of her womanhood, the splendour of her power, when his life had been hers, and her loveliness had bound him in its golden chains; she thought of the great passion that he had poured out at her feet, and that she had cheated, ruined, and driven to its guilt.

In his presence something of the brutality of hate perished; something of the memory of love revived.

She leaned nearer to him once more, with a relic of the proud and sovereign grace returned to the dark, dishonoured wretchedness of the Outcast.

“The God of the guiltless! We know no God, you and I. We know that if there be a God, he sends his sunlight on the criminal, and lets the sinless perish. You have lived in honour, and riches, and power, and men’s esteem, and I in beggary, and misery, and shame. What justice is there *there*? Our sin was mutual! Since I am a wanderer and an outcast, so should you be; since I am homeless, and

dishonoured, so should you be. Our guilt was equal, why not our punishments? If I deal you back your cruelty and your vengeance to-night; if I tell you such mercy as you gave I give to you; if I smite you with your dead crime, what is it more than justice?”

His head sank; he knew it was no more. And a great darkness covered his sight, hiding the radiance of the stars; his life was held in the iron bonds of a pitiless retribution, and in his misery the voice of the woman who had been his temptress came to him like the voice of vengeance, inexorable, but just.

“No more,” she echoed, slowly. “No more—to you. Listen, Strathmore! Since the hour that we parted I have had but one aim, one toil, one thirst, one hope—to destroy you pitilessly as you destroyed me. To see you suffer, to see you fall, to wring your heart, to kill your pride, to make every breath a pang to you, to have you at my mercy and deny it you, to shame, dishonour, scourge you, curse you. I have only lived for that!”

The words had risen, hissing through the night like a snake’s hiss, all the intensity of hate that she had cherished vibrating through them, and showing him the black and fathomless abyss on which he stood—one gesture of her hand, and he must fall, dragging downward the soulless life he loved, to perish in his guilt.

No word escaped him, no movement, his blood was ice, his breath crushed; all of life that was in him

gazed out from the agony of his eyes;—it was the petrefaction of despair.

Yet—even now—even for the innocent—he would not plead to *her*. She might destroy—she could not abase him. She saw it;—and out of the poignant virulence of her hate, a kindred grandeur, a wild reverence, flashed from the proud instincts of Marion Vavasour's nature for this man, who even in crime, even in torture, never wholly lost his greatness.

“ I came to destroy you ! Why not ? Why not ? The tiger does not spare its fangs, nor the vulture its fury ; while neither hate what they pursue as I have hated,” she said slowly, while her voice sank lower and thrilled its rich music through the night. “ I have your secret, Strathmore. I can slay what you love to-night. I can whisper to her what her husband is ; and the day when it breaks will find her dead. Oh, Heaven ! I have longed for it ! I have only lived for that—to strike her in your arms, to rend her out of your honour and shelter, to crush her down where your love cannot shield her or reach her, to take her youth, her loveliness, her innocence, and make them vile as my life, to have no pity on her, and torture you through her, till in all your years you should have learnt no misery such as *that* love should bring you. I hated her—I cursed her !—— ”

He stayed her with a gesture, grand in its command, supreme in its agony :

“Peace! Slay her if you must with my guilt, but never dare to curse her—you!—her father’s murderer.”

Her eyes dwelt on him with a nameless pain, a softened light, in which their evil and their lust were quenched: she flung her arms up toward the skies, and raised her shameless and dishonoured brow to the pure cool of the autumnal skies.

“Oh, God! to-night I too remembered *that*! I had your secret; I panted to destroy her; the wind was not swifter than I as I went to my vengeance——”

Again over the seas rang the cry of a man in his extremity—it was *past* then—her vengeance! God had looked on and seen the guiltless perish!

“It was so sweet—so sweet, that death-blow to strike *both*,” and her voice rose higher, piercing through the air, while still she raised her face upward—upward—to the light of the stars. “She was alone—your love, your strength, your power, could do nothing to shield her *then*. The night gave her to me, there where she leaned in its starlight, watching for *you*. There was no arm to protect her—no eye to behold us. She was mine! mine to crush with my hand like a bird or a flower—mine to kill with more torment still by your crime, and I could have stamped her life out as we tread out an insect’s;—and I longed for it, hungered for it, pined for it. And yet—is there a God? Does he keep even *us* from the last depths

of hell? Where I crouched in the darkness, I heard her pray, pray for all things that suffered, for all that were in sin and woe; in her joy, in her youth, she prayed for us—the guilty and the cursed! The light was on her—and I saw in hers her father's eyes, her father's smile; I remembered how I had murdered him! I could not slay her then—not *then*—even though you loved her. I could not touch her—look on her—breathe near her. Her prayer stood between us, her father's memory held her from me, the dead himself smote my vengeance from my hands. I spared her! *I*—the world must end to-night!"

Her laugh rang on the air in mockery of herself—then into her burning, weary eyes tears rushed for the first time since years of shame; she quivered from head to foot, and stood there, in the starlight trembling and afraid. In fear of him? No; in fear of that long and shameless evil which was called her Life.

He heard her;—and on his face there shone a sudden light, pure, cloudless, glorified, like that of the planets above. In torture she had not abased him, in agony she had not humbled him, in vengeance she had not laid him suppliant; but now—in that hour of release, when into the darkness of his life the ransom of an un hoped mercy came—she had her victory. She saw him bow down before her, broken, blinded, voiceless, senseless, his haughty power smitten as a granite shaft is smitten by the

lightning, his proud life pierced and shaken to the core, his soul laid bare and without shield, in the moment of his deliverance.

By her had come his guilt ;—by her also came his retribution and his redemption.

The skies reeled round him in whirling circles of starry light ; the silence of the night seemed filled with murmuring hosts of angel voices ; the dead past seemed to fall from him for ever, and be swept away into those still and lustrous seas that echoed at his feet ; and on the air, borne up on the winds and on the waves, he heard the dying words of the man whom he had loved and slain : “I forgive ! Oh God ! *I forgive !*”—as though by that forgiveness pleading there for the pardon of the guilty, for the safety of the sinless.

*He had forgiven : who should avenge ?*

In the silence where they stood together, Strathmore lifted his head and looked on her, the vulture that had spared, the panther that had known some pang of pity at the last ; and in her he saw, incarnated, his own merciless and brutal sin—saw it, loathsome as it was, denying the pardon which it lived to need, usurping the power and the judgment of deity to sate through them the vilest passions of mortality.

His limbs shook, his lips quivered, his forehead was wet with the dews of a great suffering, but on his face shone that light which once before had come there

when he had stood on the wreck of the sinking ship with death upon him, and the mad waves leaping round ; and in his eyes as they dwelt on her there was a profound anguish, gentle, fathomless, merciful, in the consciousness of his own weakness, giving forgiveness to her at the last, by whom his sin had come, by whom his years had been accursed.

It was the supreme expiation of his life.

He stretched his hands towards her where she stood, and his voice vibrated with an infinite pardon through the night :

“ The mercy you remembered to her, be remembered to you at the last, by her God ! We both murdered him with brutal guilt ;—we have both striven to atone to him through the innocent. Let us part in peace to-night ; let sin be dead in both our lives for ever.”

She looked at him one moment, in one long, last, mute farewell ;—then she bowed her head in silent acceptance of his words of peace, of his renunciation of the power of evil ; and like a shadow on the air, a spirit on the wind, Marion Vavasour swept from him through the autumn night and through the white and wreathing mists that floated from the sea, and faded from his life for evermore.

And once again, like a man bruised and stunned by mortal blow, he sank down among the coiling ivy and the sea-splashed stones, his arms outstretched,

his limbs shaken by a voiceless agony, alone in the silence of the night. For he had loved her; he had sinned for her, and all the irrevocable crime of those dead years was but the darker and more deeply damned in his own sight, because the pity of God had touched his life with an exhaustless and unutterable mercy, and had spared him the just harvest of his work when his guilt arose to destroy the innocent, and the strength of his own hand was stricken powerless.

## CHAPTER XXI.

“È POI USCIMMO A REVERDER’ LE STELLE.”

IN the still night Lucille lay sleeping, as the young flower sleeps, unconscious of the ruthless hand that has been stretched to break and to despoil it, and that has passed over it without harm because its loveliness brought back a pang of memory, an echo of lost youth. Through the lofty casement left open to the night there shone the tranquil and star-studded skies, there came the far melodious murmur of the seas ; and straying through dark traceries of foliage and the deep hues of the painted panes, the light fell on her where she slept, and shed its halo round her.

Her hair swept backward in its golden masses, a dreaming smile was on her lips, a soft flush on her brow, on which the chastened brilliance of the moonlight fell, and in her sleep she murmured, as though her dreams were seraphs’ whispers,

“God is Love !”

They were the last words of her evening prayer; the words that had stricken strengthless the hand which had been lifted to destroy her.

He heard them as, from the lonely shore, he came into her presence as to some divine and sacred thing, and stood to look on her in the repose of innocence and childhood, unconscious of the peril that had drawn near her in the silence and the solitude of the defenceless night, to strike her with his sin, and sacrifice her for his guilt—drawn so near! so near! He shuddered and sickened at its memory, gazing on her with bursting heart and yearning eyes, listening for every soft pulse of her young life, watching for every noiseless breath that passed her lips, for every smile that dreaming lent its light to sleep, as though she had been given back to him from the hideousness of death by storm, by flame, by poisoned steel, or by plague-tainted air. His dead sin had risen, and had crept to her to slay her with his past. And he had thought to bury sin and bid it keep its peace, and have no resurrection! Oh, fool! oh, fool!

“God is Love!”

Yes! God was Love, since he had saved her. He heard the words murmured in her happy rest, where she dreamed of angel voices and of lands beyond the sun; and the smile upon her lips, where she lay in the serene and silvered glory of the heavens, lulled to slumber by the gentle echoes of the distant seas, smiled on him with pardon from the dead, with mercy

for the past, with promise for the future, with light from Him by whom no prayer remains unheard and no remorse denied.

Burning tears rose into his aching eyes, deep sobs shook his frame—it was the agony of gratitude, the delirium of release ; and as he threw himself down beside her bed, his arms cast over her in her sleep, his head bowed upon the loose trail of her bright hair, Strathmore lay down for ever the sins and the passions of his past, and gave, as to the hand of God, his dedication to a life that should know no law save of mercy, no governance save of compassion, no pause in self-humiliation, no pity in self-sacrifice, no effort but for redemption, no travail but for expiation—a life that should hold its holiest as nothing worth, its best as nothing given.

And the tender chastened light of the morning stars, growing clearer and clearer to the dawn in which the shadows of the night were fading, shone on him where he knelt beside the deep pure sleep of innocence.

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Away in the deep heart of the great western forests, in the silence of the solitary swamps, where pestilence is abroad in the torrid noons, and miasma rises with every night that falls, where the dank leaves drop death, and the graves lie thick under the cypress-woods, a woman in the Order of St. Vincent

de Paul lives ever among the poor, the suffering, the criminal, the shameless, sparing herself no task, fearing no death—dead to the world, as the world is dead to her. For the dying her voice has a strange rich music, far beyond all other; for the innocent her look has a nameless terror, it is often very evil still; for those who are in dishonour, or in danger, her lips have a wild, sweet eloquence that scares them back from their abyss, and leaves them saved but sore afraid; for none has she a history. Once, when in her path some summer roses bloomed, and in the sunlight threw their soft fragrance on the wind, they saw tears gather in her eyes, and fall, slowly, as though each tear were a pang; then alone did they ever see that she thought of her youth, that she remembered her past.

In the press of the great world, far sundered from her by whom his guilt came, through whom his guilt still pursues him, one man lives who joins to the life that is known of men, a life that is unknown by any. A life, in which those who weary and are heavy laden are aided by a hand that they never see; in which every shape of suffering is sought and succoured; in which all evil memories that tempt, are crushed out, as in a debt that is due; in which all deeds of sacrifice are done with a strength that is merciless only to itself; in which a sweet and sinless happiness sheds its radiance; yet in which the poignancy of one remorse, the memory of one crime, are never lulled to peace or to oblivion, but, following the appointed

travail of a silent expiation offered only to the dead, and of a supreme duty rendered for conscience' sake alone, lay subject the stained greatness of a grand and guilty nature, and lift it upwards into holier light.

By passion his life fell, lost in darkness of the night, and sunk in lowest deeps; yet, though once fallen, who shall dare deny that, in the end, it shall not reach to that atonement which unceasingly is besought, obedient to the law which lies on every human soul, seeking for purification, striving for immortality, rising nearer and higher towards the perfect day, onward to

Other heights, in other lives, God willing?

THE END.







